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A BOTTLE IN THE SMOKE

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A BOTTLE IN THE SMOKE

CHAPTER I.

THE early dawn had given place to the golden sunlight of the Indian morning, but there was still ample shade within certain nooks in the compound of a pleasant-looking two-storied house in one of the leafy roads of Madras. Under an old banyan tree, with its tent-like stems turned downwards and its dense canopy of green overhead, stood a dainty breakfast table. Early tea was over. One bamboo chair had already been vacated by its occupant; in the other, sat a young English lady.

Only two months previously Hester Rayner had left home a bride. "She is happy, I think," was always the remark, accompanied by a sigh, made by her anxious mother, as she passed the closely written pages of the latest letter across the rectory breakfast table to her husband.

The young wife's letters gave no untrue expression of her state of feeling, yet there were times when the dream-like sensation which pervaded her outlook on the new surroundings disturbed her. The spell of the East was strong; the tropical life, the vivid colouring, the brown-skinned multitudes, the waving palms, all seemed to belong to a bright pageant in which she was only a passing spectator. And now, with the simple sense of duty which had marked the only daughter of the Pinkthorpe Rectory, she was asking herself whether it was right to yield so entirely to the wooing of the magic present. Even her weekly journal from home seemed to deepen the glamour; all in that dear distant home was transfigured by its glow; never had the tender affection of father and mother felt so precious, and who would have believed that the couple of schoolboy brothers would prove so much more demonstrative in their first letters than in the days when she had painted their wickets, made sails for their boats, and was their willing helper in all school preparations? And again the unexpected was on its way.

It came in the form of a letter which a white-robed peon now handed to her. It was the first she had received from her brother Charlie, now at Oxford, and so notably a poor correspondent that the sight of his handwriting awoke keen expectation.

She was not long in finding its outstanding piece of news. The fair, uncovered head was at once recklessly exposed to the strengthening sun-rays as she hurried towards the house, though an instant object of solicitude to the vigilant domestic. But the lithe figure flew birdlike across the brown turf, and reached the safe shade of the verandah before the white-covered umbrella was brought to the rescue.

"Alfred, where are you?" called the gleeful voice, as she hurried in at one of the many doors which led from the verandah to the house. The room she entered was already carefully darkened, having its heavy green *persiennes* closed against the solar rays, though a chink of light served to reveal the occupant at the writing-table, who raised his eyes from the blue papers scattered before him. There was a gravity and placidity about his movements which suggested his being older than his years. His figure, though slender, was firmly knit. His fine-grained skin and whole appearance gave evidence of careful culture of the body, though the long thin hands, which were resting on his papers, were those of a man of the desk rather than a devotee of the polo or cricket field.

"News, Alfred, delightful news! Actually a letter from Charlie to tell us that Mark Cheveril, his great friend, is on his way to Madras!"

"Cheveril! Why, that name is surely familiar! Yes, he was Mark too. He was one of the smaller boys when I was at Hacket's."

Suddenly Mr. Alfred Rayner's delicately-pencilled eyebrows contracted to a frown. "But, I say, Hester, he's a half-caste, actually used to boast in the most shameless manner that his mother was an Indian. Little fool!"

"Yes, his father was a lieutenant in the Indian Army, and married an Indian princess. Wasn't it romantic? It must be from his mother he got his good looks, he is so dark and handsome."

"But, Hester, what an arrant fool the man must be to set foot in India again—half-caste as he is!"

"Why, it's been the dream of Mark Cheveril's life to go back to his native land. Father always said he particularly admired that trait in him."

"Just like one of your father's unworldly notions! Let me tell you they don't work east of Suez. I'm afraid, for instance, that it will be difficult for us to have anything to do with him."

Mr. Rayner tapped his papers thoughtfully with his thin hand.

"Anything to do with him," echoed Hester, her deep grey eyes dilating. "But Mark Cheveril is Charlie's greatest friend. Listen to what he says." She turned to the letter and read: "'I've just been thinking how delightful it will be for you to see Cheveril out there. Tell Rayner I took advantage of his *carte blanche* to invite him to stay with you, assuring him that he would be welcome, as I remembered how Rayner expatiated on the hospitality of Anglo-Indians——'"

"Didn't think I was to be asked to extend that hospitality to half-castes," muttered Mr. Rayner, bending over his writing table with a sulky air.

There was a perplexed look in his wife's eyes as she glanced at him. She had not seen that expression on her husband's face before.

"And what is this noble Eurasian going to do here does your brother say? Is he going to look out for a job?"

"Oh, no, he's got work in a good service, though I don't suppose it's so good as being a barrister like you," said Hester slowly, the gladness of her news tempered by her husband's more than chilly attitude. "I'm really awfully ignorant about Indian things, you see; I must coach myself up or I shall remain a 'griffin,' I fear. Charlie writes——" Again Hester turned to her letter, but this time with a little sigh. ". . . 'Cheveril passed the Indian Civil a year ago, as you will remember; he has since been at Oxford, and is now posted to Madras.'"

"The Indian Civil! Has the fellow really got into that?" exclaimed Mr. Rayner with undisguised astonishment. "I must have missed his name in the lists. Well, surely he will have learnt by this time to keep the fact of his mixed blood dark. We must give him a hint to that effect. It is silly and sentimental, to say the least of it. But seeing he's among the 'Covenanted Ones' he'll be worth curing of this mad freak." A smile played about Mr. Rayner's thin lips; then he added briskly, "Does your brother say what steamer he's coming by?"

"The *Bokhara*," replied Hester, her air of joyous expectation already exchanged for a soberer one.

"Then he's due this very day," said her husband, starting up. "Mark Cheveril may be here at any moment, Hester. I'll see if the steamer is in yet on my way to the High Court." He had evidently reconsidered his decision "not to know" the new arrival. "Wonder if I shall recognise him. He was only a little chap in Etons when I knew him at Hacket's. What's he like now?"

"He's tall and has dark hair. He always looked such a contrast to Charlie, who is so fair," said Hester, with a reminiscent smile, recalling how often the two friends used to walk hatless on the emerald lawn at home, the fair wavy hair and the dark head in close proximity.

"Yes, Charlie is too fair for a man. I love that blondeness in you, dear, but a slightly darker hue suits the masculine gender better," returned Mr. Rayner, glancing at himself, with a self-conscious smile, in a mirror hanging on the white wall near his writing table.

In his own estimation, and it must be acknowledged, in the estimation of others also, he fulfilled all the requirements of good looks. His dark hair framed a beautiful aquiline face, though too cameo-like perhaps in its perfection. There was something unpleasant in his expression, an air of hauteur, a lack of frankness, which detracted from his undeniably handsome face.

It was, in fact, Alfred Rayner's perfectly chiselled features which, after a very brief wooing, had been the passport to the heart of the young daughter of Pinkthorpe Rectory. Hester and he had met at a large house-party—the girl's first appearance in society. She had lately left school, and was becoming pleasantly conscious that she was a free agent, no longer told to do this and that, but tacitly challenged to exercise personal choice. She was not exactly in love with the young barrister, but being on the verge of her life's awakening, a word, a look, a touch, was enough to rouse her. And when these forces were skilfully applied by the wooer, aided by a good-natured hostess with the alleged feminine love of match-making, the result may be supposed. Though with the girl herself, the matter was no further advanced, even in her own account to her mother, than was consistent with saying frankly that she admired and liked the young stranger who had come into her simple days. Sweet home security had wrapped her all her young life, and before her now stretched the glamour of a happiness to come. Might it not be sweeter than any she had ever known, whispered imaginings, indefinite but luring as the balmy air of those June days in which she gave her " promise true " to go with this man. That it was to go " over the hills and far away " added only to the fascination of the prospect.

Even the haste of the wooing had its charm for the young girl ; for Alfred Rayner asked nothing less of the anxious parents than that their precious daughter should be given to him at once. His short furlough being almost expired, his urgent request was that they should be married without delay and make their honeymoon on their voyage to India.

For two years Mr. Alfred Rayner had been practising as a barrister in Madras, and was able to expatiate in glowing words on the many-sided charm of life for the dominant race in the tropical land. His young wife had found as yet that those descriptions were, if anything, under the mark. During those early days she used playfully to tax her gratified husband that he had not conveyed to her half the charm of the bright Eastern land whose spell had hitherto been unbroken. But as she stood now in that darkened room having told her joyful news, the shaft of light which fell on his face revealed to her a little dark cloud in her heaven of blue. It was the first time she had felt that she and Alfred were not entirely in unison. Nor was the recollection quite covered when after breakfast she watched him going down the broad, white, sunlit flight of steps from the verandah to enter his office-bandy, though he called to her, " I'll see if the *Bokhara* is in and send you word."

After watching the white-covered carriage disappear along the avenue shaded by its casuarina trees, she retraced her steps slowly to her husband's writing room. Its darkness seemed dense after the glare of the verandah. For a moment she stood oppressed by it, then with quick gestures hurried to throw open the heavy green shutters and let in the fierce sun-rays. She seated herself on her husband's chair, leaning on his table, her cheek resting on her hand, her face shadowed by a sense of trouble. How cold had been the frown on Alfred's face as he had sat there! What a peevish reception he had given to her news, and what a complete surprise to her was the source of his annoyance! That Mark Cheveril, Charlie's best friend, who during his short visits to Pinkthorpe Rectory had won golden opinions from all; that he, her own good friend and comrade, should be viewed as a person of social disabilities was a revelation to her. It seemed a breach of good feeling, and disloyal to her home estimates, to entertain such an idea for a moment. Nor was her husband's sudden change of front on hearing that Charlie's friend was coming to enter the great service any more explicable to the carefully nurtured English girl. She must think it out!

CHAPTER II.

VEERASWAMY, the butler, had, according to his master's standing order, lowered the heavy rattan blinds of the verandah, and duly excluded the strengthening sun-rays from the rooms under his charge. It was therefore something of a surprise to a visitor now being announced to pass from the surrounding gloom to a chamber flooded with sunshine.

"Oh, this is good," he exclaimed, in a frank, ringing voice. "Why, I expected to find you a bunched-up mystery of white muslin reclining in a dark room; and here you are basking in a glorious light, delightfully like the Hester of Pinkthorpe, even to your pinky frock!"

"Mark, this is a happy surprise!" cried Hester with a radiant smile, coming forward from the writing-table where she sat. "This is a joy, you are my first visitor from home!"

"And you, my first welcome to my native land."

"It was only this morning I heard from Charlie that you were on your way. But did you not meet my husband? He drove off meaning to meet the *Bokhara*."

"Then Mr. Rayner and I must have missed each other. I'm sorry! We got in earlier than was expected, and I, with one of my fellow-passengers, drove at once to the Club, where I deposited my baggage and had breakfast; then I came on here."

"Oh, but you must come and stay with us. Everybody stays with everybody here, you know. And you see what great spaces we have——"

"Yes, they are most satisfactory. I've often seen them in my dreams," said the young man, bending forward, his face all aglow. "You cannot imagine the excitement, the exaltation, I felt when our steamer all at once stood still, and I looked out in the first flush of the dawn and saw the amber sands and the long straggling arms of the eastern town. I kept saying: 'This is India, the home of my mother, the wonderful land where my father came to begin his life-work, to find love and an early grave!'"

Hester's attitude as she listened to these eager words would have proved wholly sympathetic had there not crept into her mind the recollection of her husband's warning. Should she break the ice at once and give a timely caution to her old friend and comrade that he must not label himself as belonging to the community said to be so despised? No, she could not, she decided; besides, surely Alfred's prejudices were like a gossamer thread which would at once snap in the presence of this strong-natured man.

"You and my husband must meet at once," she said eagerly. "Our peon can fetch your luggage; you needn't even go back to the Club. We'll have tiffin and a long chat."

"I only wish I could stay, but I've promised to lunch at the Club with my *ami de voyage;* and then, by the way, I believe I'm inveigled into an engagement for the afternoon. The Brigadier-General, whom I met at the Club, asked me to a garden party at his house this afternoon——"

"Oh, yes, we're going to Mrs. Glanton's party. You'll meet Alfred there. Then surely we'll be allowed to take possession of you, and we'll drive home to dinner together."

"Thanks, that will be delightful! I find that for three days I'm still a free man. I'm posted to Puranapore, if you know such a place. My knowledge of it dates only from this morning. My chief-to-be very considerately wrote suggesting that I should tarry a few days in Madras."

"That's good. I have heard of Puranapore. Alfred has some clients there."

"I've no doubt Mr. Rayner will be able to tell me much that I want to know."

"Of course he will. He's been two years here, you know, and is quite an old Indian now. You and I are 'griffins,' as they call new-comers here. Alfred will be delighted to tell you all he can, I'm sure."

Soon they passed to that topic so near to the heart of Anglo-Indians—the home across the sea—and to the centre of it all to the girl, the ivy-clad Pinkthorpe Rectory set amid its green fields and hedges where the sun smiled but never scorched as in this eastern land.

Mark Cheveril was able to give her the latest news, for he had paid a brief farewell visit to it before he sailed.

"I'm thinking of what a delightful picture I shall be able to make of you basking in the sunshine as I saw you when I came in. It will go into my letter which I promised to write to your mother by the first mail," said Mark, as he rose to go. "Then we are to meet at this said Mrs. Glanton's?"

"'This said Mrs. Glanton's,' forsooth!" laughed Hester, raising her eyebrows. "I assure you she is a very formidable leader of society here. Alfred has the greatest admiration for her, thinks her a perfect model for new-comers like me. But I fear I shall never attain to her splendid manners," she added, with a little sigh.

Mark Cheveril, as his eye rested on the fair young wife, involuntarily hoped that she would not model herself on any Mrs. Glanton, however much her husband might wish it, but would remain the bright girlish presence that had graced her happy English home.

They were standing in the verandah now. The hired bandy which had been waiting under a tree was called, and the visitor drove off to keep his appointment at the Club.

The little cloud of the morning had been chased away from Hester's heart by the spell of the revived comradeship. To be sure, no managing hostess had intervened between these two to foster any warmer feelings than good fellowship. But Hester's loyalty was well developed, and her husband's sneering words of the morning still haunted her. Should she have ventured to sound the warning note, struck no doubt from her husband's larger experience, and would it have been wiser to do so even before he began his life in the East? She had friendship enough to do so. Had they not ridden together along leafy Worcestershire lanes and talked of many things? But there was a glance in Mark Cheveril's serene hazel eye, an innate courtesy about his whole deportment which made her divine that he would receive any such warning with gentle disdain. In fact, she decided, she must warn Alfred to beware of broaching the subject.

Mr. Rayner only returned from the High Court in time to join his wife on their drive to the garden party. She told him of Mark Cheveril's arrival, and of his already having found his way to Clive's Road; of the prospect of their meeting him now and of his returning with them; but she observed that her husband listened absently to the news. His preoccupation regarding the coming entertainment caused her some surprise. Social functions of the kind in the home county had never created the desire to make an impression which seemed to lurk under Alfred's excitement over his handsome new landau and the well-matched pair of Australian horses with their couple of smart syces.

The queue of carriages was already far stretching on the leafy road which skirted the Glanton's compound when Mr. and Mrs. Rayner's landau took its place there; but at last it came to their turn to alight and follow the stream of guests along the broad crimson strip to the spot where the hostess had elected to receive them.

Hester's eye was charmed by the picture suddenly unfolded to her on the wide flat lawn of the spreading compound, bordered by its glades of dense shrubberies intersected by winding walks. The mellow light of the late afternoon sun tinged all the landscape, turning to gold the graceful overhanging palms, revealing glimpses of the green waters of the tank which sparkled like jets of emerald, and etherealising the Indian garden for the first time to the eyes of all newcomers.

The long hot months were over, and, freshened by the recent rains, Madras was again considered suitable for the highest officials. The civil and military element was well represented. Red coats mingled picturesquely with the smart feminine toilettes just emerged from the latest box from home. The groups on the lawn vied with the bright schemes of colour in the flower beds which the gardeners had been labouring over for days with much repotting and many libations from earthenware chatties.

Mr. and Mrs. Rayner soon perceived the ample form of their hostess. Their names were announced by a white-robed peon. Mrs. Glanton received the young bride graciously, and seemed gratified by her evident appreciation of the bright scene.

"This promises to be a charming gathering," remarked Alfred Rayner, shaking hands with his hostess.

"Yes, I thought it would prove a nice preface to the gaieties of the season. The Brigadier wanted a succession of dinner-parties first, but you understand, Mr. Rayner, the question of who will meet and mix cordially is always a thorny business, and after all the fatigue of entertaining, one often gets a hornet's nest about one's ears. So disagreeable to have people sulking at one for fancied slights, especially so early in the season."

Hester's face wore a slightly puzzled expression, but her husband answered vivaciously:

"That is so, Mrs. Glanton. In fact, only this morning I was explaining to my wife the Scylla and Charybdis of these social disabilities."

"Ah, I see you are wise, Mr. Rayner," returned the hostess, with a responsive smile. "One cannot learn one's lessons too early, one avoids shoals of quicksands later on. Oh, the tales I could tell! And now you will understand how pleased I am to have gathered Madras together for what I call my neutral party. I felt sure I was striking the right key."

"A very minor key, I should say, mother," said the daughter of the house, strolling up and lowering her parasol, then greeting the guests.

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Rayner," said Mrs. Glanton, "I am so glad that you and dear Clarice are friends. She has all the experience of her first season to share with you, and you, my dear, have your home complexion"; and she lightly tapped Hester's sleeve with her fan as she moved aside to greet new relays of guests.

Clarice Glanton had been reckoned the chief beauty of Madras during the last season. She had undeniably well-cut features and a graceful carriage, but though no older than the young wife, she lacked that indefinable air of youth which made Hester's chief charm. There was certainly no symptom of the "close friendship" between the two, and the girl's thin lips curled with a faint cynical smile as she heard her mother's remark. It had been her intention to pass on, being on the outlook for a guest who had not yet appeared, but now she felt it incumbent upon her to exchange a few words.

"I'm afraid you'll feel dreadfully bored, Mrs. Rayner," she said in her staccato voice. "The seats are full, the sets for Badminton, archery, and croquet made up for the moment. But there will be some movement soon. You are devoted to croquet, I recollect," she added, turning to Mr. Rayner; then her attention was attracted by a tall young man advancing along the crimson strip.

"Ah, this must be the gentleman my father met fresh from the steamer this morning and invited to join our party, charging me to entertain him too," remarked Clarice, her sharp eyes scanning the coming handsome figure with its easy grace.

"Oh, Alfred, here he is,—here is Mark Cheveril," exclaimed Hester eagerly.

"Then you know him, Mrs. Rayner? Cheveril, yes, that is his name. Wherever has my mother disappeared to? I suppose I must act as hostess."

With a more gracious smile than she had previously bestowed on Hester, she went forward to meet the guest. After a brief interchange of polite words, on Miss Glanton's side marked by studied graciousness, Mark turned to greet again his old friend with a bright smile; while, with an air of nonchalance which surprised his wife, Alfred Rayner came forward to introduce himself, reminding Mark that they were old school acquaintances.

"In the dear old Hacket days, of course! How could I have forgotten that it was then your name was familiar to me! I remember your face perfectly. You are very little changed except that you were then in 'jackets.'"

"And you in Etons. I certainly shouldn't have recognised you, Cheveril, though I do remember some —of your talk." "Too well," he was going to add, but bit his lip and glanced at his wife.

"I expect I talked a good deal of nonsense," responded Mark with a laugh, secretly wondering what of his childish prattle still lingered in the mind of this sharp-looking man with his impassive face, who was saying now with rather a patronising smile:

"Well, I suppose we all live and learn." Then he added, with a neat bow: "Glad to hear you are to be our guest at Clive's Road to-night. We shall have an opportunity of talking over things new and old."

Miss Glanton, in her rôle of brevet-hostess, did not mean to permit more talk between two male guests, especially as she was desirous of monopolising one of them.

"May I introduce, Major Ryde, Mrs. Rayner?" she said, as a dapper-looking officer appeared, evidently with the intention of joining Miss Glanton. Divining Hester's disappointment on being separated from her friend, she added with a smile:

"Believe me, Mrs. Rayner, Major Ryde is as useful to the new-comer as a well-stocked 'Lady's Companion' to a housewife. He knows everybody and everything about everybody. I used to call him the young woman's best companion last season, did I not, Major Ryde?"

"I believe, Miss Glanton, you did me that honour last season, but I should put emphasis on the 'last,'" replied the major with a reproachful air. Then turning to his new charge, he piloted her towards the refreshment tent, which seemed to be the centre of popularity at the moment, to judge from the echoes of gay laughter and talk mingling with the jangle of tea cups and wine glasses which met them as they drew near.

"Now, Mrs. Rayner, seeing the creature comforts have been served, I must try to live up to Miss Glanton's character of me if you will put me to the test," said Major Ryde politely, as they left the tent. "I see there is no chance of entering the croquet lists at this moment." He glanced towards the lawn where more than one game was now in progress, elderly couples poising their mallets with an air of enjoyment, the crack of the boxwood balls sounding in the clear air as they were skilfully driven to their goal.

Hester had been an adept at the game on the home-lawns, but she did not feel inclined to enter the lists at the moment.

"Suppose we have a stroll among the shrubberies," suggested her companion.

It was among those very winding green paths that Hester had been hoping to be permitted to wander in company with her husband and her old friend, and to have the pleasure of seeing them welding together. But that would come later. She turned with gracious courtesy to respond to the amiable effort on the part of her escort and assure him that she had been longing to explore those green labyrinths.

"What a pretty effect all these gay uniforms give to a garden-party. I have seen nothing like this at home, and I don't think there were any uniforms at the only party I've been to since I came to Madras."

"Mrs. Teapes? You are right, Mrs. Rayner. I commend your discernment. That was a judge's house. In fact it is only at Government House, or on occasions when His Excellency or the Commander-in-Chief honours the gathering, that it is *de rigueur* to don our war-paint. Glad you think it so attractive! The younger men are getting lazy and prefer mufti when they can get off with it. I confess I think a well-made man never looks better than in full dress. Ah, here comes our Commander-in-Chief! Perhaps you'd like to wait and have a look at him before we begin our walk."

Hester saw an elderly man of gracious presence advance along the crimson strip to greet the hostess, his refined face lit up by a smile of singular sweetness. He was followed by his suite.

"Very glad the Chief has put in an appearance," continued the major, "Mrs. Glanton will be gratified. Very good of him to come, he is a weary man often—has seen much service. There is the Brigadier coming to greet him."

"What a fine pair of soldiers they look!" said Hester.

"They are all that," assented Major Ryde warmly. "Glad we've got a man for a Brigadier at last, instead of the little spinning-top we had, who couldn't get on his horse without his syce's back for a foot-stool, and even when mounted, was so scared by his frisky mare's paces when the band began to play that he had her ears stopped with cotton wool ! "

Hester laughed, but inwardly commented that there was more than one officer of the spinning-top order as she glanced at her rotund companion. They had now reached the shady walks which she had longed to penetrate, and not being given to repartee of the sort which fitted her companion's topics, the conversation threatened to languish.

" Your friend Clarice is a smart girl, Mrs. Rayner," he remarked, as he caught sight of a pair of strollers on a path alongside, separated by thick shrubs. " But, to my mind, she rather overdoes it at times. See how she's captured that 'griffin'? I can see her leading him about there," said the major, as he glanced maliciously through the tangled creepers.

" But don't you think people must learn to talk pleasantly about everything—and nothing—when they have a great deal of entertaining to do like Miss Glanton ? They seem so hospitable and invite everybody."

" That's just what they do—invite 'everybody'! It's Mrs. Glanton's patent method of making herself popular. She loves the voice of the majority. Very pretty in you, however, to set it down to kindness and that sort of thing—wish we had more of the bloom of charity among us, but I fear it wears off like the lovely English bloom"; and the major cast an admiring glance on the fair face of his companion.

As the talk rolled on, Hester began to think that Major Ryde's remarks were more outspoken and personal than she had been used to think quite in good taste, though she could not help feeling half amused by the smart running commentary with which he enlarged on his fellow guests, as soon as they were out of hearing.

It was therefore with true pleasure that she perceived at a little distance a lady to whom she had drawn more than to any other since her coming to Madras.

"Oh, yes, that's Mrs. Fellowes, from the sepoy cantonment at Royapooram," assented Major Ryde, showing in his tone the contempt he affected for the Native Infantry.

Hester's smile had already beckoned the older lady. The major, perceiving that his *tête-à-tête* was now interrupted, descried another companion and politely withdrew.

CHAPTER III.

THE tank is an integral part of the Indian garden, but the sheet of water in Mrs. Glanton's compound was larger and more picturesque than any Hester had seen. It looked alluring now, framed by graceful overhanging branches and flooded by the gorgeous tints of the setting sun which transfigured its stagnant green waters, making them sparkle like a bed of gems.

"Oh, what lovely red water lilies!" exclaimed Hester, as she gazed with delight on the great knotted tendrils and broad green leaves where the bright floating flowers nestled. "I've only seen white lilies, and none grow on our tank. It's only a dreary little pond. Do you think, Mrs. Fellowes, I might possess myself of some of these beauties? They would add just the lacking colour to our white-walled dining-room."

"Well, my dear, I shouldn't think that an unattainable desire, though the stems are strong and fibrous. Come, let's think!—— This excessively long parasol of mine may prove useful for once as a hook!"

But Hester, with playful agility, was already descending the flight of slippery steps which led to the darkening water, bent on capturing the prize. Stooping down she made a grasp at one of the nearest lilies, but the tangled stems were not so easily severed as she imagined.

"Take care, my dear," interjected Mrs. Fellowes with anxious eyes.

Suddenly Hester lost her footing on the slippery stone and found herself ankle deep in water, fortunately not overhead, for she had only slipped one step, the next flat green stone extending a good way out into the water. Her position, however, looked sufficiently alarming to her companion, who uttered a little cry and hastened to extend both her hands to help her.

The signal of distress happened to be heard by two strollers in the walk alongside, divided only from the tank-path by a thin jungly brake, through which the gleam of the water was visible. There was an instant crashing among the bushes, and in a moment Mark Cheveril appeared through the creepers just as Hester emerged from the water with a smiling face, though with dripping skirts, holding her trophy in her hand.

" Too late, Mr. Cheveril, in spite of your sudden display of knight-errantry ! " Miss Glanton's metallic voice rang out from the cross walk where she appeared, looking by no means amiably on Hester and her companion. " You are a rash young person, Mrs. Rayner," she said, in a bantering tone. " The idea of venturing down those filthy, slithery steps ! Why, some deadly snake might have been coiled on one of them ! And your pretty frock entirely ruined ! Mrs. Fellowes, what have you been about to let a new-comer run such risks ? " she said pertly, glancing at the older lady ; whereupon Hester forgot her wet shoes and stockings and ruined frock and hastened to defend her friend.

" Oh, indeed, it wasn't Mrs. Fellowes' fault, I even rejected the parasol she held out—but I've secured my trophy ! This, Mrs. Fellowes, is Mr. Cheveril I was telling you about," she said, introducing her friend.

The older lady held out her hand cordially ; and when Mark looked into the refined, kindly face he felt sure that the daughter of the Pinkthorpe Rectory would have at least one wholly congenial friend.

Miss Glanton did not seem to approve of the new distribution of her guests, and said pointedly :

" Now, Mr. Cheveril, I must introduce you to my mother's fern-house. We were just on our way there when we heard your despairing cry, Mrs. Rayner."

"Oh, come, give me at least the credit of the 'despairing cry,' as you call it," said Mrs. Fellowes. "I confess my nerves got the better of me. Mrs. Rayner stood the test better than I did. But oh, my dear, you *are* wet, we must see to those soaking shoes at once, they are dangerous!"

"Of course they are, Mrs. Rayner," said Miss Glanton decisively. "Here comes your husband, who will no doubt carry you off at once."

Hester felt rather like a naughty child when her husband surveyed her plight, with a more annoyed than sympathetic glance, and listened silently to the account of her misfortune.

"Of course you must go home at once, Hester, or you'll have a sharp attack of fever."

"Oh, don't be a prophet of evil, Mr. Rayner," broke in Mrs. Fellowes. "But it will be wise to go—or, we might retire. I wonder if Mrs. Glanton has one of those delightful charcoal arrangements for drying clothes?" she asked, turning to the daughter of the house.

"The mater does not possess anything so useful, I fear," replied Clarice, shaking her head.

"I shall go home! A just punishment for my behaviour," said Hester quickly, thinking there would be compensations, seeing that she would carry off her husband and Mark Cheveril. Her disappointment was therefore considerable when she perceived that she was to be bundled off alone.

"All right, Hester," said her husband. "I'll call your carriage; and look here, when you reach home, you can tell the horse-keeper to bring round my mail-phaeton for us. . . . You are dining with us, I think, Cheveril? I shall drive you home."

"Thanks," responded Mark, "but shall we not accompany Mrs. Rayner? Will that not be simplest?"—"and pleasantest," he was about to add, when he recollected his semi-hostess was by his side.

"Oh, but you cannot escape so, Mr. Cheveril," she expostulated. "Why, you haven't even paid your respects to my mother yet!"

"You are right. You cannot omit that pleasure, Cheveril," said Mr. Rayner, in a ceremonious tone. "Besides, I was in search of you. The Brigadier wants to see you; it seems you have eluded him too."

Again the arrangement of the guests did not please Miss Glanton, though she felt willing to speed the parting guest. The two gentlemen disappeared and she had to be contented to bring up the rear with the ladies.

The drive between the English habitations in Madras is often long in that city of "magnificent distances." The sudden tropical dusk had fallen on the landscape. Her Indian home looked dreary to Hester when she reached it. She felt, moreover, depressed by the events of the afternoon, and flung herself into a wicker chair in the verandah. Mrs. Glanton's exposition of her "neutral party" had jarred upon her. Major Ryde's talk was far from inspiring, and this stupid escapade, which had obliged her to be despatched home like a punished child, and over which Alfred had looked undeniably annoyed, was vexing. And as for Mark Cheveril, he might as well have still been on the *Bokhara* for all she had seen of him!

A suspicion of homesickness greater than she had yet felt was stealing over her. The only bright spot seemed Mrs. Fellowes' warm friendship; and she was now to have a fresh proof of it.

The maty boy came dragging a big cage-like coop of bamboo into the verandah. "Dosani Fellowes done send her *jhapra* for to hook up Missus," was Ramswamy's rendering of her message.

"What?" asked Hester, laughing. The ayah came to the rescue, having already made acquaintance with the useful article then coming into vogue in the fireless bedrooms of Madras.

" Dat boy one humbug ! I know all 'bout bamboo. Big chattee charcoal done put under, it make werry warm Missus clothes."

" That reminds me, ayah, I've got wet shoes and stockings, and skirts too," said Hester rising, having in her depressed mood forgotten her plight and its possible consequences.

" Oh, m'am, that's awfulee shockin'," cried the ayah, as she followed her mistress upstairs and nimbly divested her of her wet garments ; and, all excitement, gave directions for the placing of the *jhapra* above the charcoal fire.

Hester then dressed for dinner and hastened to send a note of thanks to Mrs. Fellowes for this new proof of her thoughtful kindliness ; its promptitude revealing that her friend must have left Mrs. Glanton's party at the same time as herself in order to hasten the dispatch of the *jhapra*.

" We shall make our salaams if you're inclined to go, Cheveril," Mr. Rayner was saying now, having discovered that his smart mail-phaeton was in readiness to carry him home. Mark responded with alacrity, having been secretly wondering why their departure had not been simultaneous with Hester's.

Had he been nearer a banyan tree under which an extra buffet had been placed for refreshments stronger than tea and iced coffee, he would have heard, at all events, the reason assigned by a group of men evidently more perceptive than friendly.

" Heartless prig that Rayner," said one. " Miss Glanton has just been telling me he let his wife drive home alone in her wet clothes. She had slipped on the steps of the tank trying to catch a water lily and got a ducking."

" And do you know the reason he waited ? Just that he might swagger home in that new mail-phaeton of his ! I've been taking the measure of that fellow for some time. He's got all the ambition of a thorough upstart. Where he gets all his rupees from every month passes me to guess. They aren't earned in the High Court, I'll be bound, for he's only a struggling barrister like myself!"

"And his wife a rector's daughter—told me so herself this afternoon when Miss Glanton bestowed her on me that she might sound the possibilities of that new-comer," chimed in Major Ryde.

"You were in luck, Ryde, having Mrs. Rayner for company. She looks charming, much too good for that sinister-looking fellow. I wonder too how he manages to cut such a dash, all the more since his wife is not an heiress."

"What a set of uncharitable sinners you are!" exclaimed a big youth with a benevolent face which had not lost the ruddy hue of a temperate climate. "I'll just tell you the facts. Rayner happened to volunteer them over a peg we had together at the Club the other day. First, he comes of an extremely old family, Rayner being the corrupted form of Regnier—some chap that came over with the Conqueror——"

"Very corrupted form, I should say," broke in Major Ryde. "Well, what more, Stapleton?"

"Oh, well, not much more, only the important fact that he has a large allowance from his people."

"So that's his tale! Unembroidered, on your honour, Stapleton? Well, anyhow, we'll keep our eye on this meteor—such are not unknown on our Indian firmament," muttered a man prematurely old-looking, whose appearance suggested a youth spent in struggling with examinations. "I hear the new-comer, Cheveril, is going to be Worsley's sub. at Puranapore. Don't envy him his job!"

"No, the Collector seems a thoroughly embittered man," said another speaker. "He should have risen high in the Service, but is credited with being slack. He is a favourite in the district though, and a great shikari, but there have been some quarrels in the town between the Hindus and the Mahomedans, and he is said to favour the latter unduly. He hates competition-wallahs, being of the ancient muster himself. Got on badly with his last Assistant, I believe! But I heard lately that Printer was really a *mauvais sujet*. Cheveril looks an honest, energetic fellow. I was getting into conversation with him when Rayner tacked on and led him away. Now I see they're going off together," he ended, glancing at the two retreating figures.

"Well, the possibilities of Mrs. Glanton's party seem pretty nearly exhausted. I think I shall make my salaams too. More than likely I shall see Cheveril at the Club and find out what connection he has with Rayner, and perhaps give him a bit of a warning too."

Gradually the group under the banyan tree began to break up. Meanwhile, Mark Cheveril had taken his seat beside his host, feeling the bond of interest deepened by the knowledge that there were older links between them than he had guessed when, as he wandered in Rhine-land, he had received a letter from his friend Charlie Bellairs, telling him that his sister was engaged to a young barrister from Madras, and was to be married in a few days.

Perhaps Mark would have acknowledged that a keen pulsation of regret swept over him, for had not Hester Bellairs been the one woman of whom he had ever thought as a possible life-companion? He had solaced himself as best he could by choosing for her, as a wedding-gift, a beautiful little antique cross which specially delighted Hester. Her little note of thanks had crossed the sea with him, and lay in his pocket-book, a treasured relic. . . . And now he was seated by her husband's side.

Mr. Rayner was too much engaged in steering his mail-phaeton and the spirited Australians through the motley crowd of carriages for any possibility of sustained conversation to be afforded. He was an expert whip and liked to display his prowess. The comparative silence was, however, welcomed by Mark. It was his first twilight hour in the wonderful eastern land, never more beautiful than in the swiftly-fading glow of the orange sunset. The evening breeze from the sea was softly stirring the feathery palms which stood sentinel-wise bordering the road. The aspen-like leaves of the peepul tree made a faint rustling murmur, while the glistening foliage was lit up by innumerable points of light, showers of sparks seemed to dart from every bush, rising even from the grass and glittering against the darkening sky.

"What a wonderful illumination! It looks as if the Milky Way had come down from the firmament," said Mark.

"Fireflies, merely, and like most other things in life, illusory," replied Mr. Rayner, with a dry laugh. "When you see them by daylight, they are actually only ill-shaped black flies, though they transform themselves into angels of light of an evening. Fireflies aren't our only illusion in this wilderness, Cheveril. I warn you there are many," he added, in a tone of caution, reminding himself he could not begin too early to try to batten down that strain of enthusiasm suggested by his wife's description of the young man.

But just at that moment his horses were requiring his full attention. They had reached a sharp angle of the road, and had almost run down a wayfarer who seemed in such imminent danger that Mark instinctively raised his hand, calling: "Rayner, have a care!"

The holder of the reins uttered an angry denunciation.

"If that old man hadn't bestirred himself marvellously he would have been under your horses' hoofs," said Mark, "and yet he cleared himself with an air of dignity. I hope he isn't any the worse. I say, shouldn't we pull up for an instant and speak to the old fellow? He seems to be waiting. Look, he's standing gazing reproachfully at the chariot that so nearly wrought him destruction!"

Mark's eyes were directed to where the light from one of the oil lamps, planted at intervals along the road, fell on the face of the foot-passenger, a face which instantly attracted him because of a certain wistful, expectant look it wore.

"I think he expects a word of apology, Rayner," he said again.

"Well, he shan't have it, that's all," said his companion shortly. "He needn't have been out on foot at this hour. He's got a carriage to drive in! He deserves to be run down. Bah, he's only a half-caste, after all!"

"A half-caste, did you say?" exclaimed Mark. "He interests me all the more because of that! Perhaps you don't know, Rayner, that I too am of mixed blood. It has always given me a strong feeling of brotherhood with such——"

"Take my advice, Cheveril, and pocket that fact," said Alfred Rayner, after a moment's silence. "Mind, I speak as a friend," he added, slacking his horses' pace and poising his whip. "My wife whispered to me something of this quixotic fad of yours. She, of course, is too new to India to understand, like me, the folly of it. It comes back to me that even when you were a little kid at Hacket's you used to indulge in some talk that was unwise. But now that you've got into that fine Service—and lucky you are—you must keep a quiet tongue in your head about that fact. Believe me, not even the Civil Service will carry you through if you persist in knocking your head against that post. And there's no need, Cheveril," continued his companion, glancing at him. "I was just thinking when I saw you crossing that crimson strip with Judge Teape near you, that he looked much more *chi-chi* than you did, though he's a pucka Englishman. Not a soul will ever guess it, and depend upon it Hester and I will never breathe your secret. Now there's a compact!" And Rayner bowed graciously.

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Collection Of Late Abdul Haq Burg Srinagar

suggestion that Mark was for a moment struck dumb.

Mistaking his silence, Rayner added, in a patronising tone: "You're taking offence at what I've been saying, old chap. I assure you it's for your good!"

"Offence? No, rather I should like to try to bring you to a better mind," said Mark stoutly. "These prejudices of yours are not new to me. I haven't attained to my years without having them dinned into me at home——"

"Well, perhaps your cure will be best brought about by coming out here, after all! You'll get disillusioned fast enough. Mark my words, I shall enjoy watching the process! A vile, low set are these Eurasians—as they like to be called. Now look here, Cheveril, I'll make a compact with you. Watch these crawling creatures for six months in silence, without disclosing your connection with them, and at the end of that time I'll give you leave to proclaim yourself an East Indian!"

"Thanks, Rayner, you mean kindly, I've no doubt, but I cannot enter into such a compact with you or any man. Not that I'm vain enough to take it for granted that all the world is so interested in me or my forebears as to think it necessary to descant on them at every market cross, but truth and honour must be our shield and buckler," observed Mark in an earnest tone.

It was too dark for him to see the sardonic smile that crossed his companion's face, as he muttered to himself: "High-flown young fool! But I must at once annex Hester, so that I may preserve him as a useful friend in that Puranapore business. I must write to Zynool and tell him to win over the young cub, by hook or by crook, before he cuts his teeth!"

The handsome Australians were now dashing along the avenue, and halted before the broad white flight of steps of the house in Clive's Road, which in the dusk looked a genuine marble palace. Its portico of chunam pillars was gleaming like the purest white Carrara. Lamps twinkled everywhere, for its owner liked a display of light. Through the many open windows of the large dining-room one could see the dinner table, with its tall silver lamps, artistic arrangement of flowers, and elegant furnishings, round which white-robed servants flitted.

Among the gleaming pillars of the verandah stood the lady of the house clad in shimmering white, with the red water-lilies at her breast and a joyful smile on her red lips.

" Here we are," said Rayner, throwing the reins to the syce. " If Mark Cheveril, I.C.S., will honour my humble abode with his presence," he added with a histrionic air.

" A humble abode, Rayner ? Say rather a palace ! " said Mark, springing from the mail-phaeton.

" Well, a palace if you like," returned his host with the pride of possession in his eyes. " And there stands my princess ! "

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CHAPTER IV.

"I THINK you are most inconsiderate, Hester, to take Cheveril to that squalid suburb when he might be playing tennis with the fair Clarice at the Adyar," Mr. Rayner was saying, as his wife and their guest stood in the verandah preparing for an early morning drive.

"Except for three reasons you might call me 'inconsiderate,' Alfred," replied Hester, smiling. "First, Mark promised he would go and see Mrs. Fellowes this morning; second, he does not like tennis; and third, Royapooram isn't a squalid suburb, but one of the most picturesque military cantonments."

"Yes, it certainly looked very picturesque when it was pointed out to me from the deck of the *Bokhara*, with those wonderful palms dipping down it seemed into the sea. I want to make its nearer acquaintance, and I must add Mrs. Fellowes' also," said Mark, as the landau appeared, and Hester, in pretty morning apparel, took her seat in it, followed by her guest.

Her husband watched them as they drove away, then slowly returned to his darkened writing room.

"Wish they hadn't been bound for Mrs. Fellowes'," he muttered. "She affects Eurasians, I know, and Cheveril may meet some of those detestable creatures I particularly wish him to avoid. Pity I didn't give Hester a hint in time!"

Meanwhile, the landau was carrying the pair along the leafy roads towards the sea, and soon it was threading its way by the crowded First Line Beach full of bustling commercial activity. Great droves of muscular coolies were pushing loads which good British dray horses would not lightly have tackled; but the strong shiny brown limbs, made supple by frequent oilings, seemed to have no difficulty in dragging their burdens, which they did with unconscious grace, and even with cheerfulness, judging from the resonant chorus of shouts. One side of the sea front was given up to shipping in all its varieties, while the other was lined by many-hued buildings, some so evidently of the Georgian period that one did not need to glance at the date above their Greek-pillared porticos. They were intersected by higher particoloured buildings of chunam, and except for one or two hotels, all given up to business purposes of varying degrees of importance. Against the substantial blocks were huddled some ramshackle erections which had evidently seen better days, but which were now fast sinking into godowns for storage, their peeling façades lending picturesqueness to the street scene on which Mark was looking with keen interest.

Now the carriage was nearing the lines of the Native Infantry. Not far from them stood various detached bungalows, surrounded by compounds, where the officers sojourned, with a sprinkling of other residents who liked this suburb so near the sea. Clusters of low, thatched, mud villages, with enclosures of bamboo, where semi-nude children crawled about like sandhoppers, nestled under the groups of tall feathery palms which, Mark had noticed, seemed to dip into the sparkling waters of the ocean.

Colonel Fellowes, commanding officer of the sepoy regiment, occupied one of the pleasantest houses in Royapooram. It was a much less pretentious abode than the Rayner's house in Clive's Road, for the suburb was old and unfashionable, but its compound wore a snug social air which made it look more like a home garden, Mark thought, as he followed Hester to the house.

Mrs. Fellowes was specially delighted to see her young friend as a proof that she had not suffered from her slip on the treacherous steps of the tank. She welcomed Mark with cordiality, introducing him to her husband, a tall spare man of bony frame with a simple earnest face, bronzed by the suns of many hot weathers on Indian plains where he had trained his sepoys and loved them like children.

"Yes, the Colonel and I like to think of our bungalow as a cottage with roses looking in at the window," Mrs. Fellowes was saying, as Mark, with the keen eye of the new-comer, commented on the home-like attributes of the bungalow with its trellised verandah, where creepers twined their graceful tendrils, and roses and wisteria climbed up its amber-coloured walls and pillars. "But I hope we shan't make the mistake of some Anglo-Indians and try to reproduce it at home."

"I believe you are right, Mrs. Fellowes," returned Mark. "My father's people happen to live in Shropshire, not far from Styche Hall, Clive's birthplace, and I always regretted he should have replaced the old black-timbered house by a mansion with verandahs."

"Yes," said Colonel Fellowes, who had joined them, "I once made a pilgrimage to see that house—Clive being one of my heroes. We should have worshipped that simple black-timbered house if it had still been extant. All the same, the present one isn't the gorgeous palace Macaulay would have us believe. Poor Clive, he was much maligned, as many of the makers of India have been! What would the Carnatic, for instance, be now, but for Clive? A tiger jungle —only the tigers two-footed instead of four, and tearing each other to bits!"

"The result has been good, certainly," replied Mark, "but are you sure it was not the hungry mouth of the rapacious West, craving for pepper and cardamoms, and hankering after the fabled gold and gems of Hindustan, that brought the white men? Remember he came as a suppliant trader to these shores and first begged for crumbs!"

"Granted!" returned Colonel Fellowes. "Just as the Israelites came to the land of Canaan—sent by the same Hand. Depend upon it the hosts of our forefathers were the hosts of God, as Kingsley says. But talking of reproducing chunam palaces at home, I was amused to hear Rayner saying the other day at the Club that he had got a plan of his house in Clive's Road, and meant to reproduce it in Belgravia! 'First catch the standing room,' said I. He's an ambitious young fellow that, and a pushing one! I wish his ambition would take the form of giving his wife a good mount. I told him of a perfect one to be had at Waller's stables, but he wouldn't hear of it."

"But Mrs. Rayner used to be a keen horsewoman," said Mark, recalling vividly some pleasant rides in Worcestershire lanes.

"Well, strange as it may seem, he has an unaccountable prejudice against riding, though he is a good whip and has several pairs of fine Arabs besides the two Walers. I begged him, if he wouldn't come himself, to let Mrs. Rayner ride of a morning with my wife. She was most keen, but he wouldn't hear of it. Selfish, I call it! She is so charming, quite the nicest of our brides this season," added the colonel, his eyes following Hester's slender figure as she strolled along the lawn walk with his wife.

Mark fully endorsed his remark though he did so silently, inwardly commenting on the personal note which all conversation seemed to take in his new social surroundings. He had observed it on the previous evening when more than one of those to whom he had been introduced made comments more frank than friendly concerning his future chief and others which, in home circles, would have been considered somewhat out of taste. Perhaps it was a trait of this Anglo-Indian society, bred of the narrowness of its range of topics. It was perforce illuminating to a new-comer, though he felt that the suggestion of selfishness in Hester's husband was painful when he recalled the parting words of her mother on the Pinkthorpe Rectory. 'We would fain that Hester had chosen one of whom we knew more than Alfred Rayner. As her father says, he is still an unknown quantity. In fact, the dear child's choice was too hurried. You will do much to reassure us, Mark, if you can tell us that the man of her choice is strong to lean on, tender and true!"

Even already from his few hours' acquaintance, Mark felt by no means sure that he could banish Mrs. Bellairs' anxiety by the assurance for which she longed. There seemed to him a curious hardness about Rayner, combined with a lack of manliness, making visible shallow ambitions. He wore them "on his sleeve" in fact, and Colonel Fellowes had not far to probe in putting his finger on such weaknesses. But Mark hoped that Hester had not discovered any such flaws, and he desired, brother-like, to shield her from the knowledge of them. Rayner could hardly live beside one so true and sweet as she was without being influenced for good. Whenever he could get release from his duties at Puranapore he would surely be able to trace her ennobling influence on her husband, and till then he must forbear to sound any note of trouble to the anxious mother far away.

"Ah, here comes someone we don't see every day," exclaimed Mrs. Fellowes, going forward to greet a visitor who came slowly along the shady walk. He was a man about Colonel Fellowes' age, tall but not so erect and with less broad shoulders. His face was not so bronzed as the soldier's, but his skin had a more withered look, and there was a pathetic light about his deep, penetrating grey eyes. The curves of his thin lips betokened a settled sadness, though his face lit up with a rarely pleasant smile as he returned Mrs. Fellowes' greeting.

"Welcome, Mr. Morpeth, you are a sight for 'sair een,' as my old Scots aunt used to put it."

Mark was more than astonished at the cordiality of

Mrs. Fellowes' greeting when he recognised in the visitor the man whom the restive Australians of the mail-phaeton had almost trampled under foot, and whom Alfred Rayner had characterised as a "greasy half-caste." On the first opportunity he asked his hostess the name of the guest.

"David Morpeth," she replied, "a man whom we are proud to know, though he is an East Indian," she added, lowering her voice. "You know—or perhaps you don't know yet—what an inveterate prejudice there is against these people. I always say that David Morpeth would redeem a nation; he lives and toils for his despised people, pours out his money and his life for them, often, I fear, with very poor return. He has even enlisted me, and we have started one or two things together. I must add, that though Mr. Morpeth is of that despised mixed blood, he is really personally much respected here; but he declines social advances from any quarter, so my husband and I feel honoured when he puts in one of his rare appearances. Besides, I value the little change for the dear man from the toils of those wretched people."

"I should like to be introduced to Mr. Morpeth, if you don't mind," said Mark eagerly.

"By all means! How nice of you, Mr. Cheveril!"

Mrs. Fellowes, with a pleased air, led the way to the shade of a tamarind tree where the helper of his people stood talking pleasantly to a little fair-haired English boy, the son of Mrs. Fellowes' next door neighbour.

David Morpeth's face wore a bright smile now, very different from his sad stern mien of the previous evening. Mark felt ashamed when he recalled the incident, but could not venture to apologise, though, somehow, he knew that the older man recognised him as one of the occupants of the mail-phaeton. An evident air of surprise seemed to mingle with his recognition, though all awkwardness was at once eliminated by Mark Cheveril's greeting.

"Mrs. Fellowes has just been telling me of your efforts for our poor brothers, and I want to give you the hand of fellowship," he said with a frank smile.

"I welcome it heartily, sir," returned David Morpeth with a half startled air, though his whole face beamed. Then a puzzled look flitted across it as he said slowly, fixing his deep eyes on the young man: "I believe I speak to the new Assistant-Collector of Puranapore just arrived from England? I must not take advantage of your inexperience, Mr. Cheveril. I am an East Indian—a half-caste, and I naturally try to help my own people!"

"And I also am an East Indian. My father's wife was a Hindu girl. I've always been proud of the link with this great country—my mother's land!"

David Morpeth's eyes spoke unutterable things as he gazed on the handsome open face of the young man. He seemed spell-bound by his declaration and kept silence for a moment. He walked a few paces away with his hands folded behind him, and Mark heard him uttering low tremulous words. Retracing his steps he came and stood in front of the young civilian, laid his hand on his shoulder, and spoke in a slow measured tone like one unaccustomed to lighter talk; his address, like his searching eyes, had something that reminded one of the descriptions of the ancient seer.

"Yours is a noble confession, young man! May you be able to live up to it! But believe me, there will be many a sorrow, many a tear. I would fain have further talk with you. I cannot tell you how I rejoice that my steps led me here this morning to feel the grasp of your young hand, but I must go now, this is not the place for further parleying," he added, glancing beyond the tamarind tree with a sudden startled air.

Instinctively Mark glanced round, wondering what could be the cause of his agitation. There seemed none. Only Hester was crossing the lawn, probably to suggest that it was time to bring their visit to a close. Surely the gracious presence of the young English lady could not call up the sudden air of discomfort on the old man's face. Then he recalled Alfred Rayner's insolent demeanour on the previous night, and his refusal even to apologise to the man whom he called a "greasy half-caste." Yes, that must be what made the sensitive man shrink into his shell. He did not wish to encounter the wife of his insulter, Mark decided, as he held out his hand, saying:

"We must meet again before I leave for Puranapore. I shall come and get some of your wisdom while I can."

With a glad smile Mr. Morpeth raised his sun-topee and hurried down the shady walk which made a short cut to the entrance gate.

"Oh, I'm so sorry that elusive Mr. Morpeth has eluded me again," said Hester. "I watched Mrs. Fellowes introduce you to him and said to myself, 'Now's my chance,' and when I perceived you and him in deep conversation I didn't like to intrude, and now he's gone. I saw him here once before and thought he had such a sad interesting face, I longed to know him."

"Yes, he is interesting," returned Mark, "specially so to me. He is an East Indian by birth. I only wish for this and other reasons I was not to be banished from Madras. I'm sure this David Morpeth and I would become fast friends, especially since there is the bond of race between us."

Hester looked grave, and her lips parted as if she were about to speak. Here surely was the opportunity for giving Mark some warning on this point concerning which her husband had dwelt with such harsh words. The ice had not been broken on the topic as yet, and she felt she must go softly, all the more since Alfred was now seeming to belie his words and proving an entirely gracious and helpful host; for she had not

"Mrs. Fellowes has just been telling me of your efforts for our poor brothers, and I want to give you the hand of fellowship," he said with a frank smile.

"I welcome it heartily, sir," returned David Morpeth with a half startled air, though his whole face beamed. Then a puzzled look flitted across it as he said slowly, fixing his deep eyes on the young man: "I believe I speak to the new Assistant-Collector of Puranapore just arrived from England? I must not take advantage of your inexperience, Mr. Cheveril. I am an East Indian—a half-caste, and I naturally try to help my own people!"

"And I also am an East Indian. My father's wife was a Hindu girl. I've always been proud of the link with this great country—my mother's land!"

David Morpeth's eyes spoke unutterable things as he gazed on the handsome open face of the young man. He seemed spell-bound by his declaration and kept silence for a moment. He walked a few paces away with his hands folded behind him, and Mark heard him uttering low tremulous words. Retracing his steps he came and stood in front of the young civilian, laid his hand on his shoulder, and spoke in a slow measured tone like one unaccustomed to lighter talk; his address, like his searching eyes, had something that reminded one of the descriptions of the ancient seer.

"Yours is a noble confession, young man! May you be able to live up to it! But believe me, there will be many a sorrow, many a tear. I would fain have further talk with you. I cannot tell you how I rejoice that my steps led me here this morning to feel the grasp of your young hand, but I must go now, this is not the place for further parleying," he added, glancing beyond the tamarind tree with a sudden startled air.

Instinctively Mark glanced round, wondering what could be the cause of his agitation. There seemed none. Only Hester was crossing the lawn, probably to suggest that it was time to bring their visit to a close. Surely the gracious presence of the young English lady could not call up the sudden air of discomfort on the old man's face. Then he recalled Alfred Rayner's insolent demeanour on the previous night, and his refusal even to apologise to the man whom he called a "greasy half-caste." Yes, that must be what made the sensitive man shrink into his shell. He did not wish to encounter the wife of his insulter, Mark decided, as he held out his hand, saying :

"We must meet again before I leave for Puranapore. I shall come and get some of your wisdom while I can."

With a glad smile Mr. Morpeth raised his sun-topee and hurried down the shady walk which made a short cut to the entrance gate.

"Oh, I'm so sorry that elusive Mr. Morpeth has eluded me again," said Hester. "I watched Mrs. Fellowes introduce you to him and said to myself, 'Now's my chance,' and when I perceived you and him in deep conversation I didn't like to intrude, and now he's gone. I saw him here once before and thought he had such a sad interesting face, I longed to know him."

"Yes, he is interesting," returned Mark, "specially so to me. He is an East Indian by birth. I only wish for this and other reasons I was not to be banished from Madras. I'm sure this David Morpeth and I would become fast friends, especially since there is the bond of race between us."

Hester looked grave, and her lips parted as if she were about to speak. Here surely was the opportunity for giving Mark some warning on this point concerning which her husband had dwelt with such harsh words. The ice had not been broken on the topic as yet, and she felt she must go softly, all the more since Alfred was now seeming to belie his words and proving an entirely gracious and helpful host ; for she had not heard of the episode of the homeward evening drive. It must surely have been only a fit of passing petulance which had made Alfred speak so. It would be worse than foolish in her to refer to the matter now, she decided, as, after taking leave of Colonel and Mrs. Fellowes, they drove home to baths and late breakfast.

"Here is a list I've been framing for you of important people you've got to call on, Cheveril," said Mr. Rayner with a paterfamilias manner, as he walked into the breakfast-room, evidently bent on initiating his guest in all the intricacies of social procedure in Madras. "The new-comer has to call first here, so you must positively leave cards at all those houses, Government House included, since you are bent on leaving us to-morrow."

"What a formidable array of names!" exclaimed Mark, raising his eyebrows as he scanned the sheet. "Why, one would think you were going to put me up for a constituency, Rayner, if there was such a thing in this part of the world?"

"You may thank your stars, there is not, for then you might have to canvass all the half-caste warrens, kiss babies as black as your boot, *et cetera*. Thank goodness, Englishmen will never sink to that! No, the constituency I desire you should cultivate is one of pure Englishmen. I've only given you the names of socially desirable people. You must plough through those calls, Cheveril, they are a sacred rite for the new-comer. Great mistake not to leave your card on all big entertainers, for instance! Puranapore is not so far off that you cannot respond to every desirable invitation. The fair Miss Clarice will be sure to claim you for her coming ball. In fact, I saw an invitation in her eyes, mouth, and every feature of her face!" he added, with a laugh which jarred upon Mark, who, though he was not what is called "a lady's man," and perhaps because he was not, possessed that innate chivalry for woman which seemed to rise to the surface when the slightest note of disrespect for them was sounded.

But truly, as Mark acknowledged to himself, Rayner was proving a most painstaking host. He was actually pressing the use of one of his carriages on his acceptance, and Hester assured him that the landau was at his service, as she had duly responded to all social obligations, having been, she laughingly assured him, kept up to the mark by her husband.

Mark would not hear of appropriating an article which, in this hot climate, he understood to be as essential as one's boots, and had, in fact, already ordered a hired carriage for this enforced round of visits.

His host at length departed for the High Court with semi-paternal injunctions that his guest must not skip a single name in his valuable list.

Presently the hired bandy, which had been waiting under a tree for some time, was summoned, and Mark's butler, whom, on his host's recommendation he had engaged that morning, stood salaaming below the verandah steps preparatory to opening the carriage door.

"Where master wishing to drive?" asked Narainswamy in his best English.

"Morpeth house, Vepery," was the reply.

CHAPTER V.

In a quarter of Madras where dwelling houses were not separated by so many acres of garden ground as in the more fashionable suburbs, there stood, at the corner of a shady road, a white wooden gate. It was a feature rare in the Belgravia of the town where peeling chunam posts with rusty iron sockets were often the only traces of the departed gate; one of the changing tenants having probably demanded that it should be dispensed with, another that it should be replaced, to be assured by the obsequious landlord that the order would be executed at once, though the gate in question was most likely broken up for firewood or eaten by white ants, the polite Mussulman not having the remotest intention of replacing it, however much he might assure successions of tenants that the gate was on its way to be fitted to the old posts.

But what mattered such traces of dilapidation to those often changing inmates? Were not pleasant homes, trim gateways, verdant lawns, awaiting them across the sea when the requisite number of rupees had been amassed, the years of service expired, and the exile only a memory?

Within the precincts of this white gate, however, no change of owners had interrupted its careful tendance for many a year. No period of rankness had intervened in the trim compound. Under the tall grey pillar-like stems of the cocoanut-tope behind the bungalow, the grass, by means of much watering, was almost as green as an English lawn. Shapely tamarinds, dark mango, and neem trees brooded over the garden where a wealth of old-fashioned flowers grew and prospered, sheltered by various ingenious contrivances from the scorching rays of the sun and the devastation of the monsoon. Green colonnades of broad-leaved plantains, with their curious spikes of fruit, made a dividing line between the flower-beds and the well-kept vegetable garden at the end of which, beside the tank, a *picotta* was mounted, where an agile collie swung on the primitive pump, propelling the water from below and sending it along a labyrinth of little intersecting mud-channels percolating the thirsty earth.

The visitor, who was now opening the white gate, had sprung from his bandy at the entrance to the avenue, evidently electing to walk towards the house, a proceeding as novel as it was distasteful to the syce, who sat sulky and inanimate on his perch for some moments before he decided to seek the shelter of a shady nook on the road. In fact, he had been led to expect from Dorai Cheveril's butler—the result of crumbs of news picked up from the breakfast table—that he was to have a succession of lively doings; a call at Government House to begin with, then a round of gay compounds where there would be many of his own species to fraternize with. But this 'Morpeth house,' he knew, did not offer such possibilities.

No feature of the carefully-tended garden escaped Mark Cheveril's keen eye as he made his way to the peaceful bungalow. Its verandah looked invitingly cool even in the noontide glare, overhung as it was by graceful creepers. The visitor thought he might see his new friend seated in its green recesses, but all seemed empty and silent. He was too recent an arrival to know that bells and knockers are conspicuous by their absence from an Indian abode. All beyond the verandah was open, revealing vistas of cool darkness within, but he decided that to enter unannounced would hardly be permissible even in this land of open hospitality. Recalling that Mrs. Fellowes had told him Mr. Morpeth was a lonely bachelor, he came to the conclusion that both he and the servants must be absent, and was turning to go when he heard a sign of life. A rich baritone voice broke the silence. Mark could detect in its timbre the speaking voice of the old East Indian, who, since his arrival in Madras, had twice cast his spell upon him. The air he was singing was melodious, and the words fell with clear cadence on the still noontide :

> " Light of those whose dreary dwelling
> Borders on the shades of death,
> Come and all Thy love revealing,
> Dissipate the clouds beneath."

Mark listened fascinated. It seemed to him like a solemn invocation, a passionate prayer uttered by the lonely man. The echo of those simple words was to come back to him in after years, recalling the day he stood a young hopeful civilian at the entrance of his life in the land, new and wonderful to him, listening to the cry of the old pilgrim who had borne the burden and heat of that land all his years, and whose dearest aim had been to bring light to some of those " dreary dwellings " bordering on the shadow of death.

The singing ceased, and Mark mounted one or two of the flat entrance-steps, deciding to make his way through the open doors and announce himself. But the old man's sense of hearing was quick.

" I thought I heard a step," he said, coming from the darkness within, a welcoming smile on his face. " My boys are all away at rice and siesta, no doubt."

" I hope I'm not intruding, Mr. Morpeth. I thought I should like to begin my calls by taking advantage of your kind invitation to come and have a talk with you."

" A kind and gracious thought, Mr. Cheveril. You come to cheer a lonely old man."

" But you have many interests, many solaces, Mr.

Morpeth. I heard you singing like a true musician as I reached your verandah. In fact, I must plead guilty to eavesdropping. Both the air and the words were new to me and held me."

"Yes, it's a favourite of mine. But you from England must be familiar with all Charles Wesley's hymns?"

"I fear you credit me with more knowledge about many good things than I can lay claim to, Mr. Morpeth. Hymnology has not been much of a study with me."

"Ah, but you must make the acquaintance of Charles Wesley. There is real poetry in his hymns, much more than in his brother John's. They have a beautiful haunting power which the others lack. I was glad to find that pearl among English deans—Stanley—acknowledging this in one of his books lately. But what am I thinking about, Mr. Cheveril? This is not the hour to linger in the verandah! Come and seek the coolness of my homely den here."

Mr. Morpeth led the way into the drawing-room of the house which had been fitted up as a library. In the rows of teakwood dwarf-bookcases, raised from the ground by carved lions *couchants* high enough above the matting to protect them from the ravages of white ants, were well-filled shelves of books. A case from home lay half unpacked on the floor. A roomy writing-table with well-filled pigeon-holes showed traces of manifold labours. The furnishing of the room evidently belonged to a period when it was possible to get good wood, before so many of the great forest trees were cut down. The polished chunam of the walls told of days when coolies were plentiful and lent the strength of their sinewy arms to rub the shell-lime till it gleamed like marble, even in the light of day.

"What a delightful room!" exclaimed Mark. "It looks more English than anything I've seen here, and yet you've never been——" He paused without finishing his sentence as he glanced at the brown-skinned man.

"Never been in England? No, and I fear I never shall be, though it used to be my dream in the years when I was too poor to carry it out. Yet I see now there came a time when I ought to have gone to England—but regrets are vain," he added, and a look of trouble stole into his eyes.

Habituated from his childhood to respect the English as a superior race, David Morpeth had suffered himself to be perhaps unduly crushed by that aristocracy of colour which he had so long reverenced. He had bent the knee before the prejudice against those of mixed blood, conscious of having neither the will nor the power to contend against it. His life therefore had flowed into other channels. A solitary man, he had attached himself to the domiciled community with all the fervour of a true vocation. But for occasional friendly souls like Mrs. Fellowes, he had hitherto experienced a great loneliness. He had begun life in Calcutta attached to a wealthy merchant firm, and by virtue of his high character, was eventually received as a valued partner. When he retired from active business, he elected to make his home in an old family house in Madras which had long been let, and around which was a colony of his own people.

Freyville, Vepery, soon became a centre of kindly offices for the Eurasians. David Morpeth would indeed have been welcomed in other circles, but, as Mrs. Fellowes had explained to Mark that morning, he had given himself body and soul to the despised race.

Mark Cheveril had been quick to note the chivalry of his heart, and it found an echo in his own.

"Mrs. Fellowes told me you are so immersed in work for our people that you don't even take a holiday to the hills."

"Ah, you see I have a large family to look after, but there is good cheer in the work. You must not believe all you hear about the inevitable degradation of the mixed race."

"I should be the last to believe anything of the kind. It would be a death-knell to my hopes of helping them, but I must be a learner for some time to come."

"Ah, but a sympathetic one! That makes all the difference! It is the cruel inveterate prejudice against the whole class that has led to their degradation. They have accepted the verdict passed on them by the pure races, and it has crushed them. Their tendency is to look down on manual labour, and yet in industrial callings they cannot hold their own with the inhabitants of the soil. The poor among them have sunk so low, wearing out hopeless lives in wretched crowded dens. Often only a shed with a mat as covering suffices for a home. They have neither physical nor mental energy to strike out careers for themselves. Inevitable pauperism we have, of course, as in England, and it is often encouraged by indiscriminate giving that plays into the hands of loafers, many of them pure Europeans who will not work, preferring to become beggars. It's easy enough to throw a bone to a dog and be done with it, and the well-wishers of our people are well to watch with jealous eye those trouble-hating Europeans, ay, even among the clergy, who would salve their consciences by merely giving alms."

"Yes, Mrs. Fellowes told me she used to be one of those till you enlightened her."

"And now she proves a priceless helper to a class that troubles me even more than the loafers, and for which neither you nor I can do anything," said Mr. Morpeth, with a frank smile. "Those scores of young women who live sordid, useless, aimless lives, the daughters perhaps of decent, hard-working fathers. Those girls ought to be earning a livelihood, but false notions of 'shabby gentility'—shall we call it?—impels them to lounge about all day with the proverbial idle hands which the Evil One finds so handy. From poor warrens of homes they come forth bedecked in tawdry finery that they spend their lives in sticking together. Faugh, it makes one ill to see them lolling about their pandals and ogling at passers-by," Mr. Morpeth added, with a truly British shrug of his shoulders which brought a smile to Mark Cheveril's face. "It is these eyesores," he went on, "that Mrs. Fellowes and one or two like-minded helpers have tackled. Some of them don't even know how to write or add up a sum, though they are full-grown women, and their powers of reading are so lame that many among them cannot read the simplest story with ease or pleasure, though, I understand, some are great readers and devour 'yellow backs.' Mrs. Fellowes has instituted sewing classes, and we are beginning to have higher ambitions. We mean to get them bred as printers. The compositor's trade seems specially suited for women; and Mrs. Fellowes has great plans of having them properly trained as ladies' nurses, and is already trying to enlist the Medical Staff on their behalf. Then we have a little pet scheme of getting the more deft-fingered apprenticed to watchmakers and jewellers. We think they might be in requisition for the zenanas where jewellery is so all important."

"But what about the young men? Is it only the women who have sunk to such a state of do-nothingness?"

"Ah, it is in them my hope lies! They are my sons," said Mr. Morpeth, with an eager smile. "To make them more manly, more truthful, to make their souls—that is what I live for now! You may guess then," he added slowly, fixing his eyes on Mark, "how glad an hour struck for me this morning when you made yourself known as one brave enough to come to the rescue!"

"As a humble volunteer only. But I recognise the claim, and here I am! I was going to ask you, surely there are many among the Eurasians who ought to make their way into various services? I have wondered, for instance, why they should be debarred from the army ranks ?"

"And many of them have hereditary connection with the British Army too! I confess it has always seemed to me that connection should be fostered. The ranks of the Native Infantry are of course impossible. They could not live as sepoys. Some have distinguished themselves as lawyers, doctors, magistrates, and are in receipt of incomes that would astonish their forefathers. But, alas, many of these try to repudiate their connection with the despised race; from them we often get only sneering words and black looks."

"Base, I call that! But all the more honour to the chivalrous helper!"

"Well, I often think if they could only see what a short-sighted policy their attitude is, even from a selfish point of view, I should not encounter the opposition I do when I seek posts for really capable young men. Why, they often prefer natives in offices! In fact, it is the declared policy of the Imperial Government that appointments should be reserved only for pure Indians. A false policy to my mind, and one that in the end will not strengthen the British Raj! But I must not preach sedition to a Covenanted member of the Service! I am forgetting myself!"

"By no means; your point of view is valuable to me. I seek enlightenment. It does seem the irony of fate that such a state of matters should exist. I feel it is a good omen, Mr. Morpeth, that I should so early in my day have met with an inspirer like you. I shall not be able to give you the help I might had I not been going to Puranapore. But whatever I can do is at your service. You must let me help you with your various organisations. My income is much more than sufficient for my personal wants," said Mark, as he rose to go.

"Well, rupees are needed, as Mrs. Fellowes will tell you. She is an excellent beggar! But I hold now what I value more than silver and gold," said David Morpeth, as the young man laid his hand in his. "That is the clasp of a friendly hand. May it prove a hand that shall undo heavy burdens, loose the bands of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke, as the prophet calls on us to do in a voice that rings through the ages!"

As Mark Cheveril looked into the face of the lonely man, he felt the spell of the beauty of holiness, and was more glad than ever that he had made his first call on one so stimulating, though his name was not on Mr. Alfred Rayner's visiting list.

As he waited at the white gate while Mr. Morpeth's butler was signalling to the drowsy syce to bring up the carriage, Mark was accosted by a young woman who had evidently been hanging about the neighbourhood of the cactus-hedge which skirted the compound. She was a weedy-looking girl, with a slender swaying figure dressed in tawdry finery, but her face was undeniably pretty.

"One of Mrs. Fellowes' *protégées*, no doubt," Mark decided, and was about to step into the carriage when the girl said breathlessly, keeping her eye fixed furtively on the white gate evidently in fear lest the master of the house should put in an appearance:

"I'm awfulee sorry to trouble you, sir, but I saw you in a lovelee mail-phaeton with Mr. Alf Rayner last night, and when I spied you steppin' in here I thought I should make so bold as to ask where he's livin' now—Alf, I mean?"

Mark felt distinctly surprised at this familiar mention of his friend's husband, all the more as he recalled Mr. Rayner's remarks concerning the domiciled community to which this girl evidently belonged.

Perceiving his hesitation, the girl hastened to explain:

"You see, sir, I've been away in Calcutta for months and months, so I'm a bit behind in news of my friends."

"Then Mr. Rayner is your friend?"

"He's all thatt," responded the girl, with a giggle which at once decided Mark that he was probably dealing with an impostor who might give trouble to his hostess.

"I don't feel at liberty to give you the address you ask. But if you know Mr. Morpeth, or Mrs. Fellowes, they will no doubt see you," added Mark hesitatingly.

"Ho, so you think I'm 'a case,' do you? You want to hand me over to them, I see! Don't you trouble! I'll find Mr. Rayner on my own account," said the girl, tossing her head as she went off with rapid steps.

CHAPTER VI.

Sometimes when Mr. Morpeth felt specially wearied with the labours of the previous evening, he varied his early morning walk by a drive in his little victoria. To-day he had allowed his syce to drive him along the winding roads of the suburbs, heedless whither he was being carried. Rousing himself at length from his reverie, he saw he had now reached the green precincts of Nungumbaukum, and decided to take a stroll. He alighted, and directed his syce to follow while he walked along the road.

As he passed one of the houses he overheard sounds of bitter weeping from the other side of the straggling hedge. A gap in the thicket—a mode of exit much favoured by the native servants—permitted him to catch a glimpse of a little native girl. Sobs painful to his kind heart fell on his ear, and pausing in his walk, he asked in Tamil ;

" What ails you, little one ? "

The child glanced up with startled air and, peering through the twisted tendrils, caught sight of the speaker. Encouraged by the kind voice and seeing its owner was in European dress, she replied in the best English she could muster, the words broken by sobs :

" Please, sah, Missus say I done steal gold ring. I never done no such ting. My heart done break. I not want to live one minute more. I go drown in tank ! "

" Then you did not touch your Missus' ring, little girl ? "

" Oh, no, no, I not once touch Missus' ring," wailed the child. " But what I do ? Nobody believin' me. Ramaswamy butler hurt werry sore to make me 'fess," and again the dusky head was bent in low weeping.

"What's the matter with your hand?" asked Mr. Morpeth, observing that her right hand was rolled in a corner of her red saree. "Let me see it!"

The small brown hand was obediently held out, showing swollen and bleeding fingers. Little chips of wood, of which some fragments remained, had been pushed under the nails, lacerating the flesh.

"H'm, torture! Just as I suspected!" muttered Mr. Morpeth. "Who did this?"

"Butler done take me into godown make me 'fess. When I no 'fess, he make fingers plenty sore"; and again the child burst into convulsive sobs.

Just then the sound of voices was heard, and the girl leapt from her hiding-place with a look of terror, only to come into view of a stout matron and a young lady who were approaching the dividing hedge between their own and their neighbour's compound.

"There's the little thief, I declare!" exclaimed the young lady, catching a glimpse of the red saree. "And see this gap in the hedge, she's no doubt made it flying from justice."

"Well, it will serve our purpose, for I must go at once and tell Mrs. Rayner how disappointingly her *protégée* has turned out," said Mrs. Harbottle, crossing the dividing line.

"How could you expect anything else, mama? Mrs. Rayner has only been two months in the country," returned the young lady, with the scorn of new-comers bred of two cold weathers in India.

"Look, the creature's going to slip through our fingers after all. She's making a dart through the hedge to the road"; and Miss Harbottle, hurrying forward, pounced upon the child, and seized the maimed hand still rolled in the saree, causing her to shriek with pain.

"Be quiet, you wicked little thing! I believe you're hiding my ring there. Give it up this instant, or I shall tell Mrs. Rayner what a thief you've turned into. A nice whipping you'll get from her ayah, your old granny; and I hear you tried to bite my butler into the bargain!"

"Ai, Missus, I not done nossin' bad. I not done steal ring! I not done bite butler, he only bleeding my fingers," the child wailed. Remembering the kind face which had looked pityingly upon her from the other side of the hedge, she sprang towards the gap, but the friendly figure had disappeared and Miss Harbottle's fingers were gripping her shoulder like a vice and dragging her along the compound.

Rosie was the granddaughter of Mrs. Rayner's ayah. She was a comely little maid with great lustrous eyes. Her home had been in the godown with her grandmother, who, as all good ayahs do, considered it her function to keep watch and ward over her mistress's belongings, and it early struck Hester that the child must have a very lonely life. She had already grown fond of her ayah, who was indeed worthy of her confidence, being one of the best of her type. The bright, delicate-featured old face, with its nut-brown colouring, framed by wavy grey hair, and the ready responsive smile, had at once attracted her. The ayah, on her side, was devoted to her young mistress, and was not long in telling her of her two treasures, Jan and Rosie, the boy and girl of her dead daughter. For Jan, she had managed to find service, but she had never been able to make up her mind to part with the winning little Rosie. The child, too, was useful to her in many ways. She found her rice always prepared for her to her liking when she went for her mid-day and evening meals. Rosie did a little "titching" too, the ayah assured Mrs. Rayner, but as her clothes were merely lengths of coloured muslin draped gracefully about her little person, there were not many seams to sew. The ayah had the voluble and quaint command of English common to Madrassee servants, and in a wonderful way had been able to impart it to Rosie, though, as to reading English, that was beyond even granny ayah herself. What a joy it was to her therefore when one day her mistress called Rosie to her and gave her her first lesson! The little girl was bright and intelligent, and Hester had passed hours which might have hung heavy on her hands in teaching her to read, and in telling her the simple stories she had been wont to relate to her young brothers at home. The ayah meanwhile would pass and repass on tiptoe, stealing joyful glances at her mistress and the little maid. Thus, in so short a time, a strong link was forged between the young English lady and the ayah's granddaughter. When therefore Mrs. Harbottle chanced to find Rosie so honoured, and heard her connection with her neighbour's excellent ayah, she set her heart on having her as an assistant to her own dull, heavy-featured attendant. Hester decided that such a beginning, so near the watchful grandmother, was a favourable chance for Rosie, and the bargain was concluded.

All hitherto had gone smoothly, and great was Hester's consternation, when looking out from the verandah of her bedroom where she sat busy with her home-mail, she perceived Mrs. Harbottle and her daughter dragging Rosie across the lawn. Hurrying downstairs she was met by a voluble tale from the two ladies in chorus.

"But are you sure the ring is really lost?" she asked in an undertone. "Things often turn up again—are only mislaid."

"This is lost sure enough. Stolen by that imp from my ring-stand on my dressing-table. This very morning when I was at early tea that brat was alone in my room 'tidying up,' forsooth!" Mrs. Harbottle reiterated her accusation while Rosie lay prone on the gravel, a pathetic little bundle of heaving sobs.

The telepathic agency, ever at work among the many domestics of an Anglo-Indian household, now brought the old ayah to the spot to hear what had happened to her one ewe-lamb. The nut-brown tint of her face was replaced by a greyish hue, her features seemed suddenly sharpened as she took in the situation. Folding her lean brown arms, she stood a pathetic, statuesque figure as she listened to the denunciations of the angry Englishwoman. Her eyes turned with a gaze of anguish on the little huddled figure, and catching sight of the muffled hand she went forward and made to undo the end of the red saree.

A scream of pain from the child caused her to desist. With a groan she covered her face for a moment, then looked piteously towards her mistress, saying with quivering lips :

" They done torture my pore chil'. See, Missus, that bleeding han' ? "

" Torture the child ! " exclaimed Hester with dilating eyes.

" Yes, Missus, butler poking fingers with sticks making plenty blood come to make me 'fess," said Rosie, looking up with a pitiful air.

" How dreadful ! This is shocking, Mrs. Harbottle ! What have you to say to this ? "

" A parcel of lies, of course ! Nobody laid a finger on the little wretch," cried Mrs. Harbottle excitedly.

The ayah on hearing this stepped forward again, and leading Rosie near pointed silently to the mutilated hand.

" Who did this to you, Rosie ? " asked Hester in gentle tones.

" Ramaswamy butler. He do this to make me 'fess—only—— "

Great tears rolled down her cheeks as she glanced up to Hester's pitying face.

" You see this hand, Mrs. Harbottle. This is terrible " ; and there was a flash in Hester's grey blue eyes which made Mrs. Harbottle quail. Trying to assume a defensive air, she burst forth :

" How can you believe that little liar ! Most likely she fell in trying to escape and hurt her hand." All the same she was not feeling easy at the discovery, for had she not at the butler's request given Rosie to him to try to make her confess the theft? Now she began to fear she had gone too far.

"I am sorry my husband happens to be out," said Hester. "He has gone driving with a friend who is staying with us. This is a matter that will require looking into."

"Oh, if you like to take the word of that native imp in preference to mine, I've nothing more to say," wound up Mrs. Harbottle, with an air of offence. "Perhaps you'll get the creature to confess to you after we've gone," she added, as a parting shot.

"I will—I 'fess to my werry own missus only," sobbed Rosie, and sprang forward to cling to Hester's morning gown.

"Ah, there, I told you so! You'll soon find out where the ring is hidden," cried Mrs. Harbottle, with a ring of triumph in her tone. "I'll leave you now," she added, with returning smiles as she prepared to go. "I really cannot expose myself and my daughter to the sun. We've been delayed too long already over this wretched business."

Bowing stiffly, she raised her white umbrella, and the mother and daughter hurried away across the brown turf towards the gap in the hedge.

Hester felt rather nonplussed. Did Rosie not say she would confess after all? Had the child yielded to a sudden temptation and become a thief? Was that why poor old ayah had stood by with such an unutterably stricken look?

"Come, Rosie, I want to talk to you in this very place where you used to repeat your hymn and hear nice stories," said Hester in a soothing voice. "Now tell me about all this!"

The little girl, in spite of her aching fingers, seemed to have wonderfully recovered her equanimity since the departure of her accusers.

"What are you going to confess to me, Rosie?" asked Hester gravely. "Surely you did not take the lady's ring?"

"I done take ring? Oh, no, neva touchin' ring," cried the child, looking up with candid eyes.

"But, Rosie, you said you were going to confess to me," faltered Hester.

"Oh, yes, I 'fess Missus cause Missus believe me. I done 'fess, and I done 'fess butler, only he prick my hands werry sore. Ramaswamy neva believe one word."

Hester was now entirely satisfied as to the child's innocence, and felt touched by the quick confidence with which she dried her tears and even smiled. She decided to call the ayah and relieve her poor heart by assuring her of the innocence of her granddaughter. She found her in the next room making everything, as was her wont, exquisitely tidy. She listened attentively to her mistress, but the strain did not leave her face.

"Missus speakin' true," she said, nodding her head in acquiescence. "My little girl neva done touch the lady's jewel. I know that from first. But what that matter when English lady done say she did. How can pore native woman stand up against one white lady? 'Tis Rosie's bad fate, Missus. 'Tis the will of the gods—the gods make angry at my one pore chil'? What I do?"

The ayah's face wore a bitter look, though she held her head high and went about her duties in silence.

A spirit of dreariness took possession of Hester. All seemed dark and mysterious concerning the matter. Her heart ached for the old woman, though she felt unable to make any reply to her bitter words. But though she could not bind broken hearts, she could at least dress wounded fingers, she decided, and getting out lint and bandages she applied herself to that, and was rewarded by a patient smile from the little sufferer.

CHAPTER VII.

Mr. Rayner had not, as Hester supposed, been accompanied by his guest on his drive. Some letters had reached Mark which required immediate reply, and as he was leaving for Puranapore after breakfast, he decided he must forego the tennis-party in question, and devote himself to his correspondence. He was now seated in a room adjoining the library which his host had put at his disposal. Mr. Rayner was meanwhile on his way back from the tennis-party, not in the best of tempers, for his sworn enemy, the sun, was now high in the heavens and its rays were beating fiercely on his mail-phaeton.

He was driving himself, and as he swept into Clive's Road he perceived in the shade of the hedge a waiting figure whom he recognised with anything but satisfaction, to judge from his quick frown.

"Leila Baltus, by jove! So she's turned up again,—worse luck! Thought she'd taken herself off to Calcutta for good! She's evidently lying in wait for me too! Better interview her here than nearer the house," he muttered to himself, as he threw the reins to the syce and leapt to the ground, saying he would walk the rest of the way, and directing that the phaeton should be taken to the stables.

"She's evidently bound for No. 7, or she wouldn't be so far from Vepery. Fortunate that I've waylaid the creature; she might have tackled Hester and introduced herself as a former acquaintance of mine! What a close shave I've had! Well, I'm in for a tussle now!"

His angry frown was replaced by a studied smile as he hurried forward to meet the same girl who had accosted Mark at Mr. Morpeth's gate. She was now carefully attired in a spotless white muslin dress and a gay hat with a wealth of flowers.

Mr. Rayner lifted his sun-topee.

"Good morning, Leila! You're far from home! Didn't know you were in these parts at all—thought you had gone to Calcutta to keep house for your brother!"

The girl's face was lit up by smiles. "No," she answered. "I'm here again in that hole Vepery. Claud took a wife and don't want me. But I didn't know you were back from England, Alf, till two nights ago, when I see you and another gent in that smart mail-phaeton. Oh my, what a toff you did look! All the same, you oughtn't to turn your back on old friends. You might have looked me and mother up. She will be awfulee glad to see you. You used to enjoy a bit supper with us. You'll mind that prawn curry of mother's, don't you, now?" said the girl, with an insinuating smile.

Alfred Rayner stood hesitating. Was it possible the girl did not know that he was now a married man, and had no intention of continuing the acquaintance of his bachelor days or of eating prawn curry in Vepery again? How bitterly he repented those days of his "griffinage!" when he had been fool enough in idle hours to be fêted and flattered by the Baltus household and other undesirable associates! The memory rankled, and was indeed the chief source of his bitterness against the whole Eurasian class. And with this pretty Leila he had been unwise enough to be betrayed into a flirtation. He winced to recall it. Ever since his return with his bride he had been congratulating himself that Leila Baltus was no longer a denizen of Vepery, and would not cross his path again. Yet there she was, glancing at him with encouraging eyes and an anxious smile. What would she say when she learnt that only a few yards distant a beautiful English wife awaited him? It was an awkward dilemma. No wonder the young man felt the need of choosing his words carefully.

"The truth is," he began slowly, "I'm too busy a man now to avail myself of the pleasures of bachelorhood, Miss Baltus. Besides, the distance between Nungumbaukum and Vepery is great; so you must excuse me. Salaams to your mother, forgive my hurrying off—haven't even had my tub yet!" Lifting his sun-topee he was about to beat a dignified retreat.

"So that's where we are, Mister Rayner! You would fling off your old acquaintance like a pair of done shoes!" cried the girl, her insinuating smile changing to an angry scowl. Her companion making no reply, she seemed to decide on more conciliatory tactics.

"Well, maybe it's truth that you've grown such a grand toff and you'll want to fight shy of prawn curry and all that. And to tell the truth there ain't much supper going with us now a days, or anything else. We've got behindhand, mother and me, and Claud won't be good for a single pice now he's married, so we're real hard up. Come now, since I'm so close to your beautiful house this morning you'll not grudge me a cup o' coffee in your verandah. It's a long tramp between Vepery and this grand place of yours. Oh, my, it's grand and no mistake!"

The girl looked admiringly towards the fine two-storied house, at one of the entrances of which the mail-phaeton was now disappearing on its way to the stables.

More embarrassed than ever, a happy thought occurred to the young man.

"So sorry I can't ask you to come in to-day. I've got a visitor and must really hurry off to him. But look here, Leila, sorry to hear you're down in your luck! This will perhaps help a bit"; and taking a ten-rupee note from his pocket-book he handed it to the girl, congratulating himself that now he would effect an escape.

But he reckoned without his host.

"Well, since you're too busy for even a chat with you're old sweetheart this morning, she'll just need to come again another time," said the girl, with a toss of her head, as she crumpled the note in her long brown fingers. "I'll hand your little gift to mother. She'll send you a chit to thank you awfulee for minding on her."

Miss Baltus seemed at last disposed to retreat, but a "loose end" was being discovered by Mr. Rayner. Fearing it might develop into a serious tangle, he decided to take his courage in both hands.

"Look here, Leila, perhaps you don't know that a Mrs. Rayner now reigns here. I brought a wife from England with me."

The announcement was evidently quite unexpected. The girl's amber skin grew a shade darker. Her lustrous eyes flashed fire, and violent emotion seemed to check her utterance for a moment; then she burst forth in fury:

"A Mrs. Rayner reigns—and her not me! So this is your little game? Why, it's the same joke they used to make to me when you came sweethearting—'Mrs. Rayner would reign!' You false snake! But I'll be even with you yet or my name's not Leila Baltus! You can go back to your lovelee English bride, but my word, you're not done with her you fooled," she hissed as she made a step forward, holding out her thin fingers as if to return the rupee note, but on second thoughts she crushed it in her palm again. "No, we shan't be ten rupees poorer anyhow because of the woman who has supplanted me! I'll just hand it on to my poor mother to pay for the prawn curries she wasted on an ungrateful toad!" she muttered, turning her back swiftly on the young man and hurrying away.

Alfred Rayner stood for a moment watching the slender swaying figure disappearing down the leafy road, then he turned homeward, muttering: "Don't fancy I've scotched her. That horrid vixen will give me trouble yet! What a pity I gave her that money when I can ill spare it with all my heavy expenses. Depend upon it, she'll be upon me for another note before long! I've a good mind to make a clean breast of it to Hester. She's no fool, she'll understand when I give her my side of the story that I'm simply being persecuted and blackmailed by a half-caste liar!"

Having decided on this course he walked briskly towards the house, taking the stable-entrance which happened to be nearest the part of the road where he he had been talking with his old acquaintance.

CHAPTER VIII.

HESTER, having bandaged Rosie's tortured fingers, tried to return to her letters for the English mail, but she could not put her heart into them, for she felt dispirited and ill at ease. Evil seemed triumphing, trouble falling on the innocent and helpless, and the loving God, to Whom she had tried to point Rosie in their quiet hours, appeared to be taking no notice. Mrs. Harbottle's bitter taunts still rang in her ears, and these poor mutilated fingers which she had just been binding up—were they not sufficient evidence of the malignant fate which had descended on the child's innocent head ?

As she was a prey to these disquieting thoughts she heard footsteps on the gravel-sweep below. Hoping that it was her husband and friend returning, she looked out, for she was eager to consult them as to what should be done to prove Rosie's innocence, of which she was completely convinced. Great was her surprise when she saw coming up the broad white steps, not her husband, but the " elusive Mr. Morpeth," as she had dubbed him to Mrs. Fellowes. She decided that he must have called to see Mark, but presently the butler came bringing her a card on his tray and saying : " One old Dorai want to speak to Missus."

So the visit was for her after all ! She hurried downstairs to find her visitor in the verandah with a bright smile on his face. No, he would not come in, he just wanted to bring her some good news. He went on to explain that he had heard the lamentation of her little maid behind the hedge as he passed the compound, and had also overheard Mrs. Harbottle stormily charging the child with the theft of her ring.

"I passed on," said Mr. Morpeth, "feeling very sorry for the child whose voice seemed to ring true when she assured me, 'I never done take that ring.' I got into my carriage again and presently I saw two kites having a duel almost above my head, then something bright fell through the air. I called my syce to stop, and keeping my eye on the spot where the kite had dropped its booty, I picked up this."

Mr. Morpeth held out the recovered ring.

"Oh, Mr. Morpeth, what a trophy! How kind and clever you are!" exclaimed Hester with joy in her eyes. "You can't think what a morning of anguish we've had over that ring. Rosie has been broken-hearted. What a joy this will be to her, and even more to her granny, my ayah, who has been feeling very bitter over the accusation which she knew to be false. She thought her gods must be angry with Rosie, and that it was all over with her. This is a beautiful clearing up! Now, since you won't come in, will it be too much to ask if you will step across with me to Mrs. Harbottle's and unfold this delightful ending of our trouble to her? She was much too hard on our poor little Rosie. I, like you, believed the child was innocent, but never did I dream we should have such a swift and fairy-like proof of it! But allow me first to call the child, Mr. Morpeth, you will like to see her joy!"

"Yes, I should like to see Rosie. It will be a pleasure to watch her face when she hears the ring has been found, though the thief is still a-flying. But please don't ask me to face Mrs. Harbottle," said Mr. Morpeth, shrugging his shoulders. "I heard her voice—it wasn't musical! I beg off! You lead Rosie to her and unfold the last chapter of the tale."

"But, Mr. Morpeth," began Hester, in a hesitating tone. "Am I very uncharitable? What if Mrs. Harbottle thinks I've invented the story to shield the child? I'm ashamed of my evil thought, but there—it's out!"

"You are right! A woman's wit always scores! After all, I am the most important witness in the case—saving the kite who was wresting the prize from the thief, and I fear we can't summon him! Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but to face the formidable lady—but alone, please. I want to have a word with her butler. Did you see the child's hand?"

"I did. I never was so shocked in my life! I've just been doing what I could for it. Surely that man ought to be punished for his cruelty. I only wish my husband had been at home. He's out driving this morning."

"I don't wonder you were horrified, Mrs. Rayner. No doubt it's your first experience of one of the iniquities of this land—systematised torture applied to wring confession from the victim. I grieve that you should have come into contact with it. It only goes on under the surface now, but like many iniquities, it dies hard. However, in this case I shall deal with the butler in a way he will feel—also with Mrs. Harbottle. I shall be able to tell them I saw the child's hand with my own eyes. Perhaps that will frighten them sufficiently, you need not trouble yourself further," Mr. Morpeth added, looking at the fair young wife in a protective fatherly manner. "I don't think I'll have time to see Rosie just now, since I must go to Mrs. Harbottle's. You can tell her that the true thief has been found and made to renounce his booty. I envy you the mission, Mrs. Rayner. It is ever gladsome work to unfold the lovingkindness of our God.

> "'Tis the name that whoso teacheth
> Finds more sweet than honey's cheer."

he murmured, with glistening eyes that seemed to Hester like a benediction as they rested on her.

Why had she not been able to tell the stricken ayah of that Love which seemed so near and dear to this man ? Never had that Love felt so near to herself.

"I pray that this morning's work may prove a helpful memory to the little Rosie in days to come," added Mr. Morpeth, holding out his hand with a sweet lingering smile.

"It will be a helpful memory to me too, Mr. Morpeth, I thank you with all my heart," was Hester's parting word as she turned away.

Before the visitor had reached the last of the broad flight of the verandah steps, the master of the house came hurrying round the corner of the walk that led from the stables. His recent encounter with his former acquaintance had left him a prey to angry feelings.

"I declare, if this isn't another of those vile half-castes ! We shall have the whole population of Vepery landing at our door ! " he muttered, hurrying forward and glancing with an air of insolent chilliness at the stooping figure, from whose lined face the gracious smile had hardly faded.

"What, may I ask, is the reason of your call ? I don't happen to have the——" "the pleasure" he was about to say, but with a cruel smile changed it to: "I have not the need of your acquaintance ! "

The old man's face became grey and stern. For a moment he seemed about to speak, then, shaking his head sadly, he walked away in silence.

"Oh, Alfred, how could you—how could you speak so to him ? " cried Hester, who had turned in the hall when she heard her husband's voice. "That is Mr. Morpeth, Mrs. Fellowes' friend, and mine too now."

"Yours is he ? That he shan't be ! I tell you what it is, Hester. I'll not have you encouraging these half-castes—male or female—that man Morpeth or anybody else—to come and crawl about my verandah on any pretext whatever ! It's sheer forwardness ! The fact is I can't afford to risk my position by mixing with them in any way. That's the long and the short of it!"

They had gone forward and were now standing on the threshold of the darkened library. Mr. Rayner could not see his wife's face, or perhaps he would not have gone so far. She covered it with her hands and stood mute for some moments, then with a shudder, she said:

"Oh, Alfred, there's something very wrong about this! You cannot be in earnest! I never thought——"

Suddenly Hester's voice broke and she turned away and mounted the staircase. Her husband stood looking at her retreating figure with a half repentant air, then he shrugged his shoulders and bit his lip, and seating himself at his writing-table began to fumble among his papers.

In the open houses of India there is no privacy. Mark Cheveril, busy over his letters in the adjoining room, had not failed, though much against his will, to overhear the whole conversation. He could gather that Mr. Morpeth had evidently called on some errand, and had been insultingly dismissed. It was a painful revelation, made more so by his recollection of Alfred Rayner's attitude to the man who had been almost trampled under the hoofs of his horses. Mark had been vividly reminded of the incident when he observed Mr. Morpeth's evident agitation at the sight of Hester on Mrs. Fellowes' lawn. Possibly the old man thought Mr. Rayner was also of the party, and shrank from meeting him. In the interest of his talk with the gracious host in his own library, the recollection of the painful scene in the mail-phaeton had been overlaid for Mark. Since then he had neither opportunity nor inclination to tell Mr. Rayner of his meeting with the despised East Indian, knowing well that he would not sympathise with the intense interest and admiration which had grown up already in his heart towards David Morpeth. And now the overheard words seemed more than likely to prove an impassable barrier to any mention of the subject, unless he was prepared to fight the bitter prejudice in the open.

Even more grievous to Mark had been the note of pain in Hester's voice when she remonstrated with her husband. Surely Rayner's attitude to these people was the outcome of a shallow and vulgar mind! Were gentle Mrs. Bellairs' fears concerning this union too likely to be realised? He was at the moment engaged in writing to that anxious mother far away. What could he say now to alleviate her fears, to send assurance that all was well with her beloved daughter? Yet on many grounds it was not for him to be the sender of even a breath of evil tidings. No, he must probe the matter further, he decided.

Closing his portfolio he began to pace up and down the rattan-matting of the long room. How he desired to comfort the girl who had been such a good gay comrade in past days! These last words of hers seemed wrung as from a bleeding wound. Yet it was denied him to whisper one soothing word to her who was probably weeping in one of those white rooms upstairs. The very thought of it roused the young man's chivalrous soul. His indignation waxed hot at the revelation of the shallowness and egotism which had occasioned the outburst of temper on Rayner's part. What mattered all his show of hospitality to himself while such feelings lurked beneath it? Might it not have been safer for the guarding of that trusty friendship which he desired should subsist between Hester and himself if he had not been Alfred Rayner's guest;—if he had not come into such close contact with the man? Yet it pained him to remember that he should have to leave Clive's Road with this impression on his mind. Looking at his watch he saw that it was time to get ready for the late breakfast. How could he meet his sweet hostess whom he had only seen for a few moments at early tea that morning? She probably thought that he had gone out with her husband, as had been first arranged. If she had not done so, she would have called him to meet Mr. Morpeth, who possibly may have come to return his call. Hester, he knew, had meant to devote her morning to her home-letters. How cruelly they had been interfered with! Perhaps she would not appear at breakfast, possibly he might not see her again before he left for Puranapore!

But Mark was mistaken. He had not probed the stern moralities of such secret care and trouble. How often in life has a smiling face to cover a broken heart? When he entered the breakfast-room, there sat the young hostess, sweet and gracious, entertaining two of her husband's merchant clients from Kurrachi. Rayner was at the head of the table smiling affably, vastly gratified at the impression his wife was evidently making upon his important guests. But Mark could not fail to notice that he cast an anxious glance towards her, as if pondering whether his words were already forgotten and forgiven; and as Mark encountered Hester's gaze he felt sure they were not, at all events, forgotten. Her eyes were weary, there was an increased pallor on her cheeks, and a certain pitiful curve of her lips when her face was in repose.

Never before had he admired her as he did now while he watched how skilfully she kept the ball of conversation rolling on harmless topics. Alfred, having heard an account of the ring from his dressing-boy, tried to make some inquiry concerning it. Hester briefly narrated the story, but from her repressed air Mark was able to gather that the restorer was none other than the man who, in return, had received such cruel treatment at her husband's hands.

He hardly knew whether he felt more relief or regret when his bandy was announced to drive him to the train for Puranapore. The other guests had departed, and Hester, after her efforts to entertain them, wore a visibly depressed air. When Mark clasped her hand and looked wistfully into her face he felt that she, too, thought it better no risk should be run of a repetition of the scene which had shamed her, for she gave no invitation for a future visit. His host, on the contrary, full of surface courtesy, was charging him not to fail to make Clive's Road his home when he chanced to be in Madras. Mark, at the same moment, happened to meet Hester's eye, and read there a look of doubt and pain which seemed to say, "How can he be so unjust as to welcome one and flout the other?" He felt strongly of the same opinion. One thing, however, seemed clear to him that he must, in spite of all his social disabilities in Alfred Rayner's eyes, continue to be a friend without fear and without reproach to the young wife whose happiness seemed in such jeopardy.

CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. Goldring, the Judge's wife at Puranapore, had finished her afternoon nap and was now preparing for the leading event of the day, the evening game at tennis, which on this occasion was to be held at Mrs. Samptor's, the wife of the Superintendent of the District Jail. She was therefore not a little surprised to see that lady descending from her pony-carriage at her own door when she was just about to drive to the Samptor's compound. Matters of interest in the little Mofussil society were narrow in their range, but they were none the less intense.

Mrs. Goldring snatched her last hatpin hurriedly from the deferential brown fingers of her waiting ayah.

"What can the woman want, Jane?" she said irritably, addressing her weary-looking daughter, who had just appeared on the threshold of the dressing-room. "I told her she couldn't have my silver teapot again. She almost burnt a hole in it last time, 'putting it on a lamp,' so she said! If I were at home I should say it had squatted on the kitchen range for a considerable time! I do hate that system of borrowing so much in vogue here! I suppose I must go and see what she wants. Now, Jane," she added, after a disapproving survey of her daughter, "I beg you will make yourself presentable for once. It isn't often your father gives me a piece of news, but he did tell me that the new Assistant-Collector was expected to-day. He may turn up for tennis if the Collector isn't too careless and indifferent to think of asking him to come. What a pity our meeting happens to be at Mrs. Samptor's. He might get a better impression of the station had it been elsewhere."

Jane stood unresponsive in the doorway. Her eyelids moved slightly as she listened to her mother's remarks, but she made no reply, sullenly watching her mother's portly figure clad in rustling silks as she passed downstairs.

Mrs. Goldring greeted her visitor with an interrogative "Well?" which Mrs. Samptor was keenly conscious of being more direct than polite, but she felt that the item of news which she was bursting to tell was so important that she could afford to echo "Well!" in a key which foretold possibilities.

"You will be surprised to see me here, Mrs. Goldring, instead of meeting me on my own lawn, but I saw I had a clear half-hour and thought it my duty to share my news with you. It may avoid complications later, as you will understand when you hear it."

The Judge's wife inwardly wished that her neighbour would not always be so long in coming to the point, but felt on the whole relieved that this time she did not appear in her frequent rôle of a borrower.

"Murder will out, as I often say to Samptor—very appropriate to a jailer, isn't it now? Well, the fact is I've had a letter from an acquaintance who has just got back to Madras by the *Bokhara*. Mr. Mark Cheveril, our new Assistant-Collector, you know, was a fellow-passenger. Perfectly charming she says he is, but—oh dear, what do you think? Mrs. Pate had it from a man on board, who had it from Cheveril himself. He's a half-caste! Though one would never guess it from his appearance, she says, and the astonishing thing is that he isn't the least ashamed of the fact; but Mrs. Pate confesses he never alluded to the flaw in her hearing. Now, isn't this a great shock?"

Mrs. Samptor glanced keenly at her neighbour, divining that the coming of an eligible young man must have raised a flutter of hope in her maternal heart.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Samptor," said that lady, after a moment's pause. "We shan't have the half-caste—as you call him—among us long. The Collector will soon shake him off."

"That's the very plank I cling to as might a drowning man, but Samptor's not so sure. One can never reckon on what Mr. Worsley may do! But I still cling to the hope. Look how he got rid of young Printer! There are ways and means of doing it even in the Service, though what ailed him at Printer I never could make out—most affable, I thought him. And though the Collector never said a word against him to anybody as far as I know, I felt in my bones he couldn't abide the man, and sure enough he was transferred. And I hear there were others before we came that he couldn't hit it off with. A man of strong prejudices and weak will, the doctor says he is—in confidence, of course. But he's a bit of a 'griffin' yet is Dr. Campbell, though he's a dear, and so is his wife. However, this news doesn't matter to me personally," continued the visitor, rolling her eyes on Mrs. Goldring, who was not altogether able to conceal her annoyance, much as she desired to do so. "You see I haven't any marriageable daughter with seasons passing over her head! I declare, one sometimes is made thankful for what is often foolishly regarded as a privation," she added with a sigh.

"Now, Mrs. Goldring, what I've come to say is," she continued after a pause, bending forward in her chair, "that the Collector should be told this news at once. What does he ever hear—out in camp so much—and when at home lounging in his long chair or shooting in the paddy fields? And who is the proper person to do it but yourself—the Judge's wife—the chief lady of the station? Yes, Mrs. Goldring, we must hand over the disagreeables of your position as well as its amenities! You will have your opportunity made for you, for the Collector is actually coming to us this afternoon—told Samptor so."

Again she felt that she had scored, for the Collector was generally rather conspicuous by his absence from the social functions of the little society.

"But what am I thinking of? I should be in my place on my lawn receiving my guests instead of chattering here, and there is my humble chariot stopping the way of your landau which I see appearing"; and Mrs. Samptor, with an "*au revoir*," nimbly skipped away—many hot weathers, which had encumbered Mrs. Goldring with much superfluous flesh, having had the effect of robbing the little lady of all superfluity in that direction, leaving her lean and brown-complexioned, and, though "country-born," British to the core in all her prejudices.

Mrs. Goldring's heavy features were marked by an air of worry as she watched her visitor drive off. How she hated that little woman with her sharp tongue and her divining eyes! And it was only when it suited her purpose that she would acknowledge her precedence as the Judge's wife, though certainly there was something in the suggestion that she was the proper person to enlighten the Collector concerning this misfortune. But when had she ever confided to Mrs. Samptor that she reckoned on this new-comer as a possible fish for her matrimonial bait? Truly she might save herself that trouble! The girl was too trying for the accomplishment of any such design, she thought, glancing with irritation at her daughter who came slowly into the room.

She was a pale girl, blanched by two hot weathers on the plains; there were dark lines under her dull blue eyes, and her fair hair, which had been her one beauty at home, looked limp and lustreless as it escaped in untidy strands from her faded tulle hat. Her dress also had a washed-out, crumpled appearance. Yet this girl had been the pride of loving hearts at home. Notwithstanding their multifarious duties as heads of a select boarding school for young ladies, her father's sisters had mothered her so tenderly that her heart was still tenaciously with them and their daily round. The artificial life in India was hateful to her, yet it held one bright spot. The face, that had worn such a sullen air, lit up as she heard the sound of wheels.

"Here comes daddy!" she cried, with a note of glee in her voice as she sprang out to the verandah.

The Judge, who had descended from his carriage, had not by any means the impressive appearance one is wont to attach to legal dignitaries at home. He was a small, meek-looking, fair man, with mild, blinking blue eyes, and a chronically tired expression. Though still in the prime of life, only his fair hair, unmixed with grey, saved him from giving the impression of being quite an old man. A struggling youth and the over-pressure of examinations, even more than the ravages of the climate, had thus prematurely aged him. But the Service had no better or more devoted member than James Goldring. And as for his loving heart, none knew it better than his daughter Jane, who was now welcoming him.

"Look here, little Jean, why send that big landau to the Kutchery for me? You know I prefer my little bandy."

"Of course, I know, daddy, but mother said the landau was to fetch you this afternoon."

"I did, James," said Mrs. Goldring, coming forward. "You will persist in coming straight from the Kutchery to tennis in that hideous little band-box of yours and stepping out of it like a Jack-in-the-box. You've no regard for appearances—it doesn't do! And you, Jane, are just the same, you encourage your father——"

"She does," returned the Judge, with a smile and a loving glint in his blue eyes as they rested on his daughter. "Well, I suppose I must go and make myself as gay and festive as you are," he added, looking admiringly at Jane's faded toilette without the least consciousness of its defects.

"First your cup of tea, daddy," said Jane, bounding off and returning with a special brew in a lovely

Sèvres cup and saucer which had been her gift to him.

"A very bad habit you're getting your father into giving him tea before he goes out. And Mrs. Samptor looks furious when he declines her cakes—not that I specially desire to save her feelings," added Mrs. Goldring, recalling the sting of the recent interview.

"Ah, but I do," said the Judge. "So not even a single biscuit with my tea, Jane, that I may do full justice to Mrs. Samptor's cakes, which are excellent, and made by her own tiny fingers."

"Oh, don't you be paying her any compliments. She's quite conceited enough already. I've had her here not five minutes ago with no end of tittle-tattle—quite upset me!"

"No end of tittle-tattle in Puranapore! She must have a lively imagination! I'm sure I've heard nothing exciting at the Kutchery to-day."

"I shall tell you her news afterwards," said Mrs. Goldring, pursing up her lips as she rose from her chair. "We'd better not keep the horses waiting longer. I hear the Collector is to be there. I want a word with him if possible."

"By the way, I did hear a bit of news to-day after all. The new Assistant has arrived! I shouldn't wonder if Worsley brings him round to the Samptors'."

"That I should think very unlikely from what I've heard this afternoon, knowing the Collector as I do," returned Mrs. Goldring with an emphatic air. "Come, Jane,—how you do loll about! Why did you not put on that new frock I took such trouble to order for you instead of that blue rag your aunts sent?"

"I was just thinking what a pretty blue it was, and how well it matches Jeannie's 'germander' eyes," said the Judge with a smile, patting his daughter on the shoulder as she followed her mother to the carriage.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. SAMPTOR, in her rôle of hostess, welcomed Mrs. Goldring with ceremonious effusiveness, ignoring their parting a few minutes previously. Every time the afternoon entertainment revolved to her compound, Mrs. Samptor felt the delight and importance of the occasion, and certainly she spared no pains to make it pleasant. The fact of her being country born and bred, though it had not impaired her British energy, had given her a mastery over the details of domestic life never attained among the changing Anglo-Indian society. A notable housekeeper, she was well versed in all the tricks of native servants, and got better service from them than anyone else in the station, albeit she ruled them with an iron rod. In bazaar dealing, gardening, pickle-making, and all housewifery lore she was supreme. Being childless, her whole devotion was given to her husband, a big, square-shouldered man with a handsome, good-natured face, who looked like a giant beside his tiny wife as he came forward to greet the visitors.

The only other guests as yet were the young engineer and his wife, and being recent comers, were patronised by the hostess. They sat obediently under the safe shade of a spreading peepul tree on the lawn, where stood the tea-table, which was covered by a spotless linen cloth and groaning with proofs of Mrs. Samptor's skill in the manufacture of cakes.

The Judge at once linked his arm into the jailer's and began to stroll down a shady walk.

"Talking shop, of course! Mrs. Goldring, you should really keep your husband in better order! What can a humble Superintendent of the District Jail do when the Judge leads him into temptation?" said Mrs. Samptor banteringly.

"Yes, the worst of it is, daddy promised to eat a lot of your cakes," remarked Jane bluntly, while her mother groaned inwardly.

"Did he now, dear? How sweet of the Judge! You just go after him, Jane, and pull his coat-tails and remind him of his promise. As for Harry, he won't ever touch anything between tiffin and dinner. But when he eats—he eats!" said Mrs. Samptor, with pantomimic gestures.

"And yet you tempt weaker men by your nice cakes," exclaimed the doctor, who had just arrived. "Is that quite moral?"

"Strictly so, Dr. Campbell, since I happen to know that you haven't broken your fast since early breakfast!"

"How came you to know, Mrs. Samptor? Was it one of the spirits said to inhabit peepul trees that whispered it? Really you are not canny!"

Mrs. Goldring glanced more approvingly at the doctor than she generally did. He was right, this divining little woman was not "canny."

"Is my wife not here?" asked the doctor, glancing round.

"She will be presently," answered the hostess. "I happened to send her some quail Harry shot last night, and as I saw her driving townwards I know she went to share them with Noel Stenhouse, and to see how he is. No wonder he gets down with fever living among those horrid natives and slaving for the good of their souls as he does! You must have come from your hospital by the back way or you would have met her. Ah, there she is! You'll be happy now, doctor!"

Mrs. Samptor went forward to meet a sweet-faced lady who was crossing the lawn. The doctor followed, and husband and wife exchanged greetings which showed that they were still lovers after years of marriage. The sorrow which had visited them on the death of their two little children had only served to draw them closer to each other.

The little group still lingered in the vicinity of the tea-table, the literal-minded Jane having brought her father back to partake of the notable cakes. Presently Mrs. Samptor, with a pleased exclamation, sprang from her wicker chair.

"Ah, here he is—the Collector has actually kept his promise for once! But who has he got with him? Oh, of course, the new Assistant! Dear me, what a handsome young man!" she murmured, and everybody glanced with interest at the pair who came up the avenue, deep in talk.

Mr. Felix Worsley, though such a familiar figure in the station, was seldom seen to such advantage as at this moment.

"If he would oftener look like that what a blessing it would be," muttered Dr. Campbell, whose sharp eyes noted that the usually sombre face was lit up by a certain cheerful alertness; there seemed to be a new light in the dark, penetrating glance often half veiled by folds of heavy eyelids. "What a handsome, personable man the Collector might be if he always held himself like that," further soliloquised the doctor, as he glanced at the well-proportioned figure and beautifully shaped head showing a thick grizzly thatch as he bared it in response to Mrs. Samptor's greeting.

"Oh, Alan, he does look nice," whispered Mrs. Campbell; whereupon the doctor asked with a smile:

"Which? I'm so taken up with the Collector's wakened-up appearance, I've no eyes for the newcomer yet. Yes, but he does look a fine, straight young fellow," he added, glancing at Mark Cheveril with approving eyes.

Presently introductions were effected all round, and

Mark found himself under the peepul tree drinking tea and looking with keen interest at the new faces which would soon become familiar to him.

Mrs. Goldring, like the doctor, did not fail to note the Collector's unusual air of accessibility, and decided to make hay when the sun shone. Afternoon tea being a beverage she knew he abhorred, she saw no reason why she should not draw him aside without delay and put him in possession of the facts necessary for his guidance at this juncture. " Duty obliges me to enlighten him ! As Mrs. Samptor says, ' Who if not I ? ' What a mercy he happens to be in good humour ! My task will be an easy one. Everybody knows that, gruff and ungracious as he often is, Mr. Worsley is a well-born English gentleman, and no doubt he will not brook this latest insult of having a half-caste thrust upon him ! "

With these reflections, Mrs. Goldring, in her most sprightly manner, advanced towards the Collector.

" Since you and I both hate croquet, which seems to be the order of the afternoon here, suppose we have a stroll, Mr. Worsley ? "

" Well, I don't object to a stroll. Gouty limbs don't take kindly to this sunset hour under a tree. But who said I loathed croquet ? " asked the Collector sharply, his eye travelling towards the lawn where mallets were being chosen and all seemed in train for a social hour. " A mere assumption on your part, madam ! On the contrary, I consider croquet an excellent game and a great adjunct to sociability."

" What a bear he is ! His love of carping always comes to me like a slap on the face ! But wait till he hears my piece of news. Well I know he hates natives and half-castes, and croquet into the bargain, but I'll let him off with that for the moment," thought Mrs. Goldring, as she prepared to play her trump card.

Trailing her long rustling skirts across the grass while the Collector sauntered at a safe distance, she and husband and wife exchanged greetings which showed that they were still lovers after years of marriage. The sorrow which had visited them on the death of their two little children had only served to draw them closer to each other.

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Trailing her long rustling skirts across the grass while the Collector sauntered at a safe distance, she led the way to the most sequestered walk in the compound. At first she only hazarded a few desultory remarks interspersed with faint praise of her hostess's gardening powers, for the little lady held the acknowledged palm in all floral matters throughout the station. But the Collector seemed to require some topic of keener interest to rouse him. How gratified she felt to think she held the trump card in her hand! Turning towards him, she said suddenly: "I'm really surprised to see the new Assistant such a decent-looking young man!"

"Decent! Your choice of such an adjective is hardly happy, madam," said the Collector, raising his bushy eyebrows. "Mr. Cheveril is a civilian like your husband and myself."

"Ah, but with a sad difference," cried Mrs. Goldring, clasping her hands dramatically. "I grieve to have to shock you, Mr. Worsley, but better now than later. In fact I feel it is my bounden duty to unbosom myself at once of this painful secret."

"Bless my soul, what is it?" asked the Collector, pulling himself up with a start.

"Yes, I saw from your manner to him that you had not heard. Well, the poor young man is actually a half-caste! Does not even deny it, I'm told—speaks of his shame quite openly."

"H'm, has he confided in you, madam?"

"Now you know, Mr. Worsley, that is not possible, seeing I saw him for the first time only five minutes ago. But, believe me, I have the information first hand——"

"Would you believe it, madam, so have I? Would you be surprised to learn that I heard it from the young man himself? I suppose I must accept that as 'first hand'; and I must further tell you he has rather scored in my eyes in making this avowal!"

"What! Do you mean to say you are to be satisfied with a half-caste?" cried Mrs. Goldring, retreating a step, her face purple with indignation.

"You are surely not going to expose us to such a situation. I reckoned, Collector, you had only to be told the fact to see it to be your duty as head of this station to try at least and arrange a transference as soon as possible," she gasped, hoping that even if no practicable step could be taken she could at least set the Collector against the young man.

"You reckoned without your host, I fear, madam. You will require to rearrange your views as to the acceptance of this new servant of the Government for Puranapore—that's all. I also am only a servant."

"Pooh, as if you hadn't got young Printer spirited away quickly enough because he didn't hit it off with you——"

"That remark of yours, madam, implies a liberty to which I am unused," said the Collector, drawing himself up with a haughty air. After a moment's silence he lifted his hat, and was about to move away when Mrs. Samptor came hurrying up.

"Oh, Mr. Worsley, I've found you at last! Why ever did you take him to the most forsaken part of the garden, Mrs. Goldring?—especially seeing he comes so seldom; I'm always anxious to impress the Collector favourably——"

"Which you succeed in doing," said Mr. Worsley, with a courtly bow, relieved that his *tête-à-tête* was having such a definite interruption, for he was doubtful if he had attained his end in getting rid of the irate lady.

"I've just come to ask you if you will take dinner with Samptor and me to-night, and bring that charming Mr. Cheveril with you. The Judge has just been saying what an acquisition he will be to our little circle, and I'm sure we're all of the same mind—now we've seen him," wound up the audacious little lady, stealing a glance at Mrs. Goldring's discomfited countenance.

The Collector was inwardly much gratified that Mrs. Samptor should have bestowed on his new

Assistant such a timely and hearty certificate in the hearing of his detractor, but not even his sense of gratification could induce him to accept her proposal of dining out. He was too wedded to his own surroundings either in camp or bungalow to be persuaded to exchange them of an evening, but he softened his refusal by saying: "Mr. Cheveril will no doubt be delighted to be your guest one evening before long, meanwhile, till his luggage arrives, he has consented to be mine."

"Oh, well, I shall wait till he takes possession of his own solitary bungalow, then I shall secure him! Oh dear, if that isn't a big goat trespassing among my precious crotons," and, tucking up her skirts, the little lady darted after the intruder.

The Collector stood watching her with a comical smile on his face, while Mrs. Goldring gazed with sullen contempt on what she afterwards described as "Mrs. Samptor's vulgar antics."

Not content with protecting the crotons, the agile lady was bent on chasing the trespasser from the compound, but the Indian black goat was more than a match for her. Scrambling up a tree, he clung there, looking down triumphantly; but the owner of the trampled crotons was not to be outdone. Up she scrambled after him, though it was only on receiving some stinging cuffs that the goat acknowledged himself beaten and made off.

"Wonderful person that! When would you or I have energy to perform such a feat, Mrs. Goldring?" said the Collector, shaking with laughter as he went forward to proffer assistance. Mrs. Samptor, however, disclaimed his help and alighted airily on the ground, making him an elegant curtsey with outspread skirts.

"Well done, Mrs. Samptor! My only regret is that your husband did not witness the acrobatic performance. Mrs. Goldring and I were too small an audience."

The Judge's wife scorned the imputation of being one of the spectators of such a scene. In fact, she afterwards explained, she tried to shut her eyes during its progress. She moved off in majestic solitude, filled with even more resentment against the little woman than she felt against the Collector for his scathing rebuke.

Mrs. Samptor, meanwhile, was unconscious of treachery. Of the chameleon type, she had no scruples in changing her point of view when brought face to face with the frank young civilian; moreover, his gracious acceptance of her hospitality had quite won her heart.

"Let Mrs. Pate say what she likes, that boy is not an East Indian, Harry!" she whispered to her husband. "Anyhow, I'll not believe it! I'm off to warn Mrs. Goldring not to say a word about it to the Collector. She'll catch it if she does, if I'm not mistaken. I can see from the look of his eyelids that he has taken a fancy to the young man already"; and off she had bounded to the croton walk, to perceive, however, that she had come too late. "The fat was in the fire," she narrated to her husband that evening as they sat in the verandah after dinner. "I couldn't help the woman mismanaging him, could I now, Harry? If she'd had eyes in her head she could have seen the Collector was as pleased with the boy as a child with its latest toy. It really wasn't my fault if she brought down his wrath upon herself, was it now?"

The jailer was too deep in his after dinner nap to make any response, but Mrs. Samptor was used to forego responses, and frequently counted them as spoken when the only reply was a snore.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. SAMPTOR divined rightly. The Collector's first impressions of his new Assistant were deeply favourable, and they arose partly from the very point which Mrs. Goldring deemed would prove fatal—the disclosure of his alleged social disabilities. Mark Cheveril had not been in Madras for more than three days without hearing remarks concerning his future chief which would have caused some natures to have assumed from the outset a defensive attitude. But no sooner had he entered the Collector's bungalow than he felt drawn to the lonely man, careless in dress and manner, hardly rising to greet his visitor from the long armed chair where he lounged, smoking a cheroot, surrounded by two faithful dogs. In a few moments Mark was occupying a similar chair by his side, being introduced to his dogs and his cheroots, and feeling completely at home.

Crotchety, querulous, quarrelsome, Felix Worsley might be, as alleged; but somehow the young man felt instinctively that whatever his faults of manner and circumstances, "in him there nothing common was or mean." The man was a noble English gentleman to the core. Mistakes he might have made in governing his allotted territory, but they would prove mistakes of head not of heart. Before his Trichy smouldered in ashes, Mark's heart had already gone out to his chief with the liking of quick magnetism meeting a response, and it brought a light into Felix Worsley's eyes seldom visible there in these later days.

How different, for instance, had been Alfred Rayner's reception of his avowal of mixed blood from that of the man by whose side he sat, telling him that his link with the country had already fostered sympathy with the people of his native land!

"Well, it begins to dawn on me now that I'm very near the end," was the Collector's slowly enunciated reply. "A downright enthusiast like you is what we need here. No doubt, Cheveril, I'll often be for your holding the reins tight, but I'll try to give you as much rope as I can, my boy. I'm weary and baffled—dead tired of the whole game of life long ago. But it must go on—even Mrs. Samptor's tea-party."

With that he had risen from his chair, and on the way thither had shared with the new-comer kindly but illuminating comments on the little circle, so that when Mark stood on Mrs. Samptor's lawn he seemed to know them all.

The game of croquet, which he had been playing with Mrs. Samptor as partner, was triumphantly finished, much to the little lady's satisfaction; and Mark was now eager to avail himself of his freedom to listen to the Judge's conversation. This was followed by the Superintendent's annals of the jail, which he undertook to show him over one day before long.

"We must get you interested in your nearest surroundings before the Collector carries you off on tour through his territory," he said, with a good-natured smile.

"Yes, charity begins at home, as I try to remind the Collector sometimes when he turns a deaf ear to my petitions for the town," rejoined the doctor, who stood by his side. He was a short man with broad shoulders, though hollow-chested, and with an eager face, deep set eyes, and high cheek-bones—a typical Celt, thought Mark, glancing at him, noting the air of feverish energy with which he spoke, and contrasting it with Samptor's Saxon calm.

"I tell you what it is—our Collector is too fond of the far-away bits of his district, and inclined to belittle his nearest plot—our teeming town down there."

"Is your work in the town, Dr. Campbell?" asked Mark.

"He does plenty there, anyhow. Morning, noon, and night he's at work among the Puranapore people," interrupted Mr. Samptor, looking down with a kindly smile upon the eager little man.

"As District Surgeon my work is ostensibly among the English, but you see, Mr. Cheveril, what a little flock we have here since they've taken our regiment away. Of course I'd be delighted to have the chance of attending this big man here, but he never even sneezes; 'so what I do?' as the servants say. I try my hand at a little work among the Indians, and have got a dispensary in the heart of the town."

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale, doesn't it, Dr. Campbell?" broke in Mrs. Samptor, always with ears alert.

"I'll tell you how it is, Mr. Cheveril, this man spends his time, his money, and himself in fact, over these ungrateful black creatures. Came here for an easy post because his health wasn't good, and does more work than any other doctor on the plains of India!"

"All Mrs. Samptor's embroidery, I hope you understand," said Dr. Campbell, smiling.

"Well, if it were English folk he was helping I shouldn't so much mind, but these treacherous, seditious natives, I cannot away with! And there are such swarms of them, I try to suggest to the doctor that his time would be well occupied in helping to get rid of scores."

"Hardly a doctor's point of view, Mrs. Samptor! Unfortunately there is too much of that among the people themselves. The mortality is awful, even when there is no epidemic or plague, not to speak of their own feuds, which are decimating at times."

"The balance of power seems always wavering between the Hindus and Mahomedans in the most curious way," remarked Mr. Meakin, the young engineer. "Which is uppermost just now? Which is your jail full of at the present moment, Samptor?"

"That's an official question the jailer may not be disposed to answer," said the doctor. "However, I happen to know too well who has the upper hand—and why"; and the doctor began pulling his black moustache furiously.

"Come now, Campbell, we must not talk shop with the new Assistant on the very evening of his arrival," returned Samptor.

"If I thought the Collector would dose him well with it in office hours I would forbear, but——" The doctor shook his head doubtfully.

"All the same," said the big man with an air of decision. "Our Collector is a great symbol of authority in countless villages through which he drives or rides leisurely, smoking his eternal cheroot, halting to dispense justice with unrivalled sagacity and kindliness. I'm often with him, so I know. The people worship him, and he has a wonderful bird's-eye view of the whole region, I assure you"; and the jailer glanced admiringly at the man he was defending as he strolled along the lawn, his arm linked in the little Judge's.

"'A bird's-eye view'! Yes, I grant you he may possess that, but he has a terribly cavalier way of dealing with caste prejudices, for instance. And you know, Samptor, what a standing grievance that omsque is."

"Ay, well, that perhaps was a pity," said the big man, looking down at his boots. "But everybody makes a mistake at times," he added, glancing at the doctor's face, on which a cloud rested.

"The Collector should have known that trouble was bound to come when he granted a site for that mosque so near the Hindu burning ground. And now, though the Mussulmans are the intruders, they, forsooth, are petitioning to have the burning ground removed to another spot. Infamous plotting, I call it!"

"Yes, there seems to be a good deal of bad feeling between the Hindus and the Mahomedans just now, I notice," said the engineer.

"Fanned by Zynool and his crew," returned the doctor, with an impatient gesture. "Can't think how the Collector favours that Mussulman so much. They have his ear somehow, some say through that clever butler of his. As for the disturbance the Hindus make with their processions during the hours of prayer in the mosque, anyone who has listened to a Mahomedan yelling with a cracked voice, 'Allah eh-eh-eh,' must admit that his outward forms of worship are quite as disturbing as a tom-tom and the blowing of the conch."

"Well, doctor, if you had stood at the door of the Mosque as I've done on duty, and heard the Hindu population out with their goddess Mariyamina and listened to the howling and tom-toming fit to break the drum of your ear, and that when the place was filled with Mussulmans at their prayers during the sacred feast of Ramazan, you would have felt that they had good reason to complain. Why, though their lips were moving in prayer, they were itching to be at the throats of the Hindus! If it had not been for the Collector's courage that day in standing at the Mosque door all the time the procession was passing, there must have been bloodshed, and he did that in the interest of the Hindus even more than for the other side. I can tell you, Campbell, there's many a Hindu in Puranapore remembers that day and knows what the Collector saved them from. It would have made a picture to see him as he stood there," ended the jailer, with a look of admiring recollection in his eyes; and Mark Cheveril felt as if he, too, had seen that picture.

"Well, they're warming up for riots again down there, sure enough," said the doctor, shaking his head.

" No saying what you may come in for, Mr. Cheveril. See you keep an open mind, anyhow."

" And don't, like the doctor, be wholly given over to a belief in the mild Hindus *versus* the Mussulmans," said Samptor with a laugh, as he laid his big palm on the doctor's shoulder.

Mark had found the foregoing conversation a little enigmatical. His hero—born of two hours ago—was not evidently quite without flaw, but as evidently he was able to inspire many of those nearest him with a liking and a loyalty which is not always the portion of the ruler of an Indian territory.

As he walked by his side between the cactus hedges on the darkening road and listened to his talk, Mark felt that whatever his faults might be, Felix Worsley, Collector of Puranapore, had become to him already a fascinating personality.

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As he walked by his side between the cactus hedges on the darkening road and listened to his talk, Mark felt that whatever his faults might be, Felix Worsley, Collector of Puranapore, had become to him already a fascinating personality.

CHAPTER XII.

THE houses of the English official residents in Puranapore were all in fairly close neighbourhood, though each was surrounded by its own ample compound. They were mostly thatched bungalows with deep verandahs. The Judge's house was the only "upstair" house, as the natives call a house of two storeys. It was also the largest in the station, being usually appropriated by the Collector; but Mr. Worsley, being solitary, had given it to the Goldrings, and elected to live in a small flat-roofed bungalow, grey and colourless, with a pillared verandah unrelieved by creepers like those which adorned Mrs. Samptor's entrance. The Government office stood a little further down the road, a group of grey stone buildings of the Georgian period, surrounded by a grove of cocoanut palms. At one end a great banyan tree, with its branches growing downwards on the brown grass and its dense foliage of glossy green, made a chosen retreat for the various native witnesses and the police peons in attendance at the Court House. There they squatted, ate betel-nut, and chattered in their native Tamil; while a group of crows perched near listened to all with their heads to one side, always ready to pounce on any food within their reach.

The ancient town itself was quite a mile distant from the European quarter, not even a mud village intervened, so the English residents were more divided than usual from the native population. To none was this topographical isolation more welcome than to the Collector.

"It is, in fact, my reason for preferring to camp in this sleepy hollow," he explained to his new Assistant as they walked homewards after Mrs. Samptor's tea-party. "You don't know what a relief it is to be out of reach of all the tom-toms and shrill street cries and the constant hum of the bazaars, not to speak of the vile odours."

"I quite took a liking to the scent of the charcoal fumes of the little native villages studded about the Madras roads," said Mark.

"I loathe them and all Indian scents—even the scent of the garlands they bedeck one with at their *tomashas* are odious to me, and I hasten to seek relief in a cheroot. But I confess I have a liking for my Kutchery on horseback. One can mow down a lot of cases, listen to scores of grievances in the open, under a good spreading tree. Everything comes before one on tour, you will find. In fact, we are reckoned a kind of terrestrial providence, expected to redress every grievance from a murrain among the cattle to a rival claim on a water-spout in the bazaar. Our territory includes many thousand square miles. It's no joke! But being obliged to itinerate is, after all, the saving grace of a civilian—it's a sort of vagabondage which I like—or did before the spring went out of me," added the Collector with a gloomy air. "Take my advice, Cheveril, choose the Revenue in preference to the Judicial side of the civilian's life. I can see it will suit you best. I believe our good little Judge there would grow several inches taller if he went on tour, and was not so devoted a slave to his cases and abstracts and his blue books. Much of that red-tape business will be your bitter portion for some time to come, young man, I warn you!"

"My apprenticeship, no doubt! I expect these files are useful to beginners, though they seem to spell drudgery later on."

"Very neatly put, they do spell drudgery with a vengeance! They ought not to be piled on the shoulders of Indian officials as they are. In fact, they're more often like the lash of the slave-driver than decent business. I wish some of our young reformers would organise a big bonfire of them—say simultaneously throughout the length and breadth of India—a sort of red-tape mutiny! But remember, some men live and move and have their being in those said files! They are poetry to Goldring, for instance, and to some of the younger men, I notice. I suspect it is the old sinners like me that chafe most against that side of the work."

"Well, I'm curious to know what my experience of it all will prove," said Mark. "I don't think I'll ever find much poetry in files, though, after all, it depends on their subject-matter."

"Yes, tragical enough tales are often compressed into blue books, and comedies too, for that matter. You'll find things go on very methodically in our Revenue Office down there, Cheveril. I've got some excellent Mahomedan clerks who do their part like clock-work. I confess I prefer them to Hindus. They are more manly for one thing, and one gets a shade nearer to some understanding of them than with the subtle though childish Hindu. But I am in the minority here. The doctor is always shaking his head over the Mussulman population in the town, declaring they have the upper hand. Well, I own as far as Moideen is concerned, he has the upper hand of me. There he is anxiously looking out for us, in case we are going to be late and his dinner should fall short of the perfection he aims at."

"What a commanding figure he is, I noticed him whenever I drove up to your door. So he is a Mahomedan! He certainly contrasts favourably with my Hindu, who has got a cringing air I don't like."

"There's no cringing in my major-domo! He once rather affronted me years ago. A lady, rather an old campaigner, happened to be dining with us, and thought Moideen had spilt wine on her dress. Pointing it out to the man, she said witheringly: 'You ape!' For once Moideen, who was then in the dew of his youth, forgot his manners. Beating his breast and with flashing eyes he shouted: 'I not one ape, I one man!' It was an unpleasant moment, I really feared the furious Mussulman might do the lady some injury. But age and experience have sobered him. He has developed into the most perfect of servants. I've no doubt he caters well for himself as well as for me, as Mrs. Samptor sometimes attempts to hint, but I suddenly become stone deaf. There are some truths one can't afford to listen to. 'Where ignorance is bliss, *et cetera!*'"

"Don't you think there's a good deal of fallacy in that couplet, Mr. Worsley? It's like pulling the blinds down when one's garden is being ravaged by a black goat—like the culprit Mrs. Samptor was chasing this afternoon."

"Just a case in point! For my part, I much prefer having the blinds down to scrambling up a tree to fight with a goat as that little lady did. Yet I admire her pluck! Well, here we are, Cheveril, in my den where I keep the blinds down metaphorically as well as literally as much as possible," said the Collector, as he walked up the broad grey steps of his bungalow which looked a more cheerful abode when brilliantly lit than in the daytime. "Moideen knows I'm a lover of light. He illuminates for me every night as if I were a light-keeper."

The dingy dining-room was transformed, lit up by tall candelabra; the candles all shaded by glass. The table glittered with exquisitely kept old English silver plate, flowers artistically arranged, glancing cut-glass, spotless English damask; "no country tablecloths my master having," Moideen was wont to boast to the other boys of the station. "I making list to best shops in London, no bazaar bobbery here."

But not all the handsome table appointments, the perfect cooking, the faultless waiting of Moideen and his satellites could banish from the young Assistant's mind the thought that his chief was a weary, disenchanted man, and all the talk of the evening only served to deepen that impression.

Next morning, when he stood in the writing-room, into which the drawing-room of the house had been converted, and where Mr. Worsley always sat, he noticed that on the shelves for books there was an entire absence of any kind of literature, only a few old magazines and newspapers, and some rows of blue books, though according to his avowal on the previous evening, these were his special detestation. Some books on sport there were, but not a single volume of poetry, history, or even a novel. Mark felt glad to remember that his own boxes were bringing a fairly liberal supply of mental food, and that he had arranged for the due arrival of his favourite magazines. How good it would be if the Collector came to find in his bungalow a source of pleasure which was certainly absent from his own! What a happiness that would prove, thought Mark, as he paced up and down the verandah after early tea!

Moideen presently appeared with soft tread and searching eye to bring him the unwelcome news that "Master not done sleep last night, fever coming, not able to get out of bed this day." He also brought the suggestion that the young Assistant should find his own way to the Government Offices. This Mark was nothing loth to do, though he felt sorry to be without his chief on his first day of initiation.

The inevitable office-bandy was in attendance, and after five minutes drive he stood within the grey portals, and was welcomed by the Judge, who showed him round, and introduced him to the subordinates of his department. Soon he was seated at his table ready to begin work.

Several Hindus were waiting for an interview. All of these seemed to wish to see the Collector, and showed disappointment at his absence. One visitor was announced, however, who, Mark noticed, showed no regret at the chief's absence, but looked with keen interest at himself such as none of the others had evinced. Glancing at his card, he read the name "Zynool Sahib." Surely, thought Mark, I have heard that name before! Yes, he was the Puranapore client whom Rayner had mentioned. The man had evidently heard of him from that source also, and was now come to take the measure of the new Assistant. Beady twinkling black eyes peered out from bulging flesh, the coarse red lips were so thick that they showed each curve in spite of the dense bushy beard and moustache. Over one colossal shoulder was flung a green cashmere shawl, richly embroidered. The folds of his white turban looked a work of art compared to the swathes of muslin which enveloped the heads of the Hindu visitors. He was evidently a person of importance in his own eyes, a man of substance probably, but not seemingly a favourite, Mark decided, observing that the Hindus, who still lingered in the hope of seeing the Collector, exchanged ominous glances on his appearance, and one after another made their exit by another door, showing that they declined any contact with the new-comer.

There was a malicious twinkle in Zynool Sahib's eyes when he remarked that after all they were obliged to re-enter by the main door through which he had come to secure their sandals, which native courtesy demanded should be left at the entrance.

Mark's quick eye noted that the present visitor's feet were encased in white stockings and shining patent leather shoes, which he retained. It was a very small bit of dumb show, but the young man felt immediate sympathy with the humbler owners of the sandals, and turned with a slight sense of prejudice to listen to the owner of the plethoric voice.

Zynool Sahib expressed himself in pompous English of a sort, and made polite inquiries as to "His Honour the noble Collector," begging that expressions of his regret for his illness should be conveyed to him, and hoping that he would be well enough to grant his "humble slave" an audience one lucky day before long. He then assured Mark in flowing periods that he was desirous of becoming, from this day henceforth, the "humble slave of the present company," as he designated the young Assistant. Mark thanked him rather coldly, and began to wonder what the man's morning mission really was, when suddenly it was revealed to him.

"What am I saying?" jerked Zynool, shaking his bushy beard. "I am stoopid as an owl! This truly is my best lucky day, and not another! For does not this lucky day give me the acquaintance of one who it is revealed to me is the friend of my patron, my guiding star, who but the La'yer Rayner, Pleader, High Court of Madras? I humbly beg on my bended knees," he added, which expression, be it understood, was symbolical, as Mark perceived with relief, fearing that otherwise it might fall to him to assist to raise the mass of flesh from the ground.

"I beg on my prostrate knees," he repeated, bending forward and clasping his fat hands together, "that your Honour will embody La'yer Rayner in your own redoubtable person to me, your humble slave, and will henceforward defend me from all the plots and persecutions of my town enemies who buzz about me like evil flies, who are many and strong as the sands of the sea. And for this end your humble slave will now proceed to touch your palm."

Fixing his beady eyes on Mark he slowly drew out a well-filled silken purse through whose meshes pieces of gold glittered. He bent low before the Assistant's chair and laid the purse by his side on the table. The young civilian flushed, then turned pale. He had heard of the offering of bribes by natives, but surely it was early in his day for such an incident to happen! Did he look such a vulnerable person, he asked himself with a sense of dismay. Rising from his chair, he folded his hands behind his back, and said in a tone of repressed anger: "Put that purse in your pocket instantly. Englishmen don't take bribes!"

The Mussulman's amber face assumed a blacker hue. For a moment he stood as if he felt himself trapped, then licking his red lips quickly, his beady eyes shot fiery glances at the young man as he muttered in reply: "No, but half-castes do!"

It was the first bearing of the cross which Mark Cheveril had to undergo. He waxed a shade paler, and seemed about to speak, then he checked himself and silently pointed to the door.

The man's demeanour instantly changed.

"Pardon your humble slave! He has been misled," he stammered. "By holy Mahomet, I'll make the dog that misled me pay for this!"

Mark still pointed silently to the door. Zynool cast one long searching glance upon him, regarding him evidently with roused curiosity from top to toe. Then, salaaming profoundly, he sighed noisily and waddled out with a baulked expression on his cunning face.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER Zynool's departure, Mark sat down to examine certain blue books which the Judge recommended for his perusal, but the late interview rankled. He could not concentrate his attention, and thought, with a sigh, how speedily he had been brought face to face with one of the unpleasant realities of official life. Even his vanity had received a shock. Did he look so clearly on the surface a man likely to have his price? The idea was revolting. Should he tell the Collector what had occurred or would it be best to bury the incident fathoms deep, was the query which haunted him throughout the remainder of the office hours.

The Judge before leaving looked into the new Assistant's room with a friendly smile to see how he had been finding his way, and suggested that they should walk home together. Mark cheerfully assented, delighted to find that in this land of carriages one was sometimes permitted to use one's legs. The sun had lost its scorching element, and leafy Puranapore was bathed in a soft yellow radiance which reminded him of an autumn evening at home. A gentle breeze stirred the tree tops as their lengthening shadows fell on the white ribbon-like road. The twilight hour conduces to confidences, and Mark felt moved to introduce the unpleasant experience of the morning which was still uppermost in his mind, feeling that he could find no wiser confident than the trusty man of law by whose side he walked. But just as he was bracing himself to unfold the incident, he perceived Mrs. Goldring and her daughter coming towards them.

Recalling her supercilious nod of the previous evening, he was surprised to receive quite a gracious greeting from the Judge's wife.

Jane, with a joyous smile, sprang forward to take her father's arm, and Mark found himself by Mrs. Goldring's side. After expatiating on the pleasures of an evening stroll, she remarked that it was unfortunate the Collector was unable to be at his office, though how she came to be aware of the fact she did not divulge. Mark had yet to learn that the station was like a glass house, all its happenings common property. It is true Mrs. Goldring did not generally lay herself out for the reception of servants' gossip after the manner of Mrs. Samptor, but her encounter with the Collector still rankled, and she decided to follow her little neighbour's methods in being on the outlook for gossip; and also, for the present, to hide her adverse feelings towards the new Assistant so that, if possible, she might sow discord between him and his chief. Having heard from her ayah that the Collector was " resting " to-day, she determined that she would waylay the young man, and give him some hint of the foibles of his master. She certainly succeeded in startling Mark when she suddenly glanced at him keenly, saying :

" You had a visit from that chief of snakes, Zynool, this morning, I understand ? "

Politeness forbade him to turn abruptly to his interlocutor and ask how she came by this piece of news; he therefore only assented briefly.

" I may as well warn you, Mr. Cheveril, in confidence, of course, that we all deplore the Collector's infatuation for Mahomedans. The favours he grants them are spelling mischief down there in the town, as Dr. Campbell will tell you, though my husband may be too loyal to his brother-civilian to speak his mind," she added, turning half round and rolling her protruding eyes upon the pair behind who were gaily chatting, their thoughts far away from the squabbles of station life.

Mark's first impulse was to assure his companion that in the present instance, at all events, Zynool Sahib had shown no desire to interview his chief, but on the contrary had planned his visit in his absence so that he might take stock of the new Assistant; but he felt disinclined to make a confidante to the smallest extent of the lady by his side, who continued excitedly:

"You will have the whole story soon enough, so I may as well unfold it at once, Mr. Cheveril. That Mahomedan butler of his has great influence with the Collector. My husband tries to excuse Mr. Worsley by saying he is not in the least aware that the man goes out of his own province, or he would not tolerate it for a moment. But do we not know there are none so blind as those who won't see? Well, this Moideen is a poor relation of Zynool, who is one of the richest men in the town, and it is he who set him to work on his master for permission to build a mosque on an ancient site."

"But that was surely a legitimate enough request," interjected Mark.

"Ah, but listen! The whole thing was a wicked plot on the part of the Mussulmans to annoy their neighbours. The site was near the river and the burning-ghaut of the Hindus; and so, of course, they have been up in arms more or less ever since. Now wasn't that a most unprincipled proceeding, Mr. Cheveril?"

"On whose part?" asked Mark coldly.

The chilliness of his tone was not lost on Mrs. Goldring, who tossed her head, saying:

"On whoever the cap fits! For my part I've never had any doubt who is the real culprit, but my position forbids me to say."

The usual tennis-party was to be held that evening in Mrs. Goldring's compound. The hostess never doubted that the new Assistant would put in an appearance after the favour she had been extending to him. She was not a little mortified, therefore, when he politely declined, pleading as his excuse, when she pressed him, that he must see how the Collector was now, and, if well enough, keep him company.

" Believe me, you are wasting your fragrance on the desert air, Mr. Cheveril. The Collector vastly prefers his cheroot and Moideen's company to yours or mine," said Mrs. Goldring with a malicious air. But Mark lifted his hat and disappeared down Mr. Worsley's avenue.

The late conversation had by no means a reassuring effect on the young man. He glanced with new interest on Moideen. Beneath his obsequious demeanour, he thought he could detect an uneasy smile as he met him and ushered him into his master's writing-room. The Collector welcomed him with a cordial smile, making light of his morning's ailment.

" It was only a touch of liver, though Moideen tried to make me believe I was in the grip of fever." Then he turned to talk of office matters, and was anxious to hear Mark's impressions of his first day at his new work.

After briefly recording the business which the clerks had put into his hands, he led up to the visit of Zynool.

" So the rascal turned up at last ! " said the Collector. " I've been summoning him for weeks, and he has evaded me. Now he comes the only day I've been away since I was on tour."

Mark was about to remark that it was clear now that it was owing to his absence the Mahomedan had presented himself that morning.

" Then you don't like the man ? " he asked, with an air of relief, remembering Mrs. Goldring's assertion that Zynool and the Collector were hand-in-glove. " My impression was certainly most unfavourable," he said, the blood mounting to his face, " as you will believe when I tell you that without any ostensible cause he actually approached me with a bribe—drew from the inner folds of his muslin a bag of gold, and said he wished to lay a gift in my palm. He looked daggers when I told him to pick up his money and go. Rather a humiliating experience for my first day in office, wasn't it? I hope I don't look a likely subject," wound up Mark, with rather a sore smile.

"*You* don't," answered the Collector, with frank emphasis on the pronoun. "But that confirms my suspicions that such methods were tried and succeeded not so very long since, and it throws fresh light on some things. The blackguard! So he put forth that early feeler to see what stuff you were made of! Good; he found his match this time!"

Mark, happening to glance at one of the screen doors at the moment, perceived a pair of handsome brown feet with a massive ring on the great toe planted on the rattan matting. He at once recognised them as Moideen's and strode across to the door, but when he reached it, only Sheila, one of the Collector's setters, stepped in with an apologetic air.

The Collector, lying back in his chair absorbed in thought and taking satisfying puffs of his cheroot, had not noticed the incident. Should he call his attention to it, Mark pondered, but decided to ignore it. Possibly the man was only passing the door, though certainly those brown feet had had a stationary appearance.

Presently the Collector proceeded to unfold, in the frankest manner, the circumstances which Mrs. Goldring had been eager to weave into a sinister web. He narrated simply how he had been led to sanction the building of the mosque in a neighbourhood which now suggested trouble all round.

"The fact is, having more confidence in Printer than was possible later, I left the negotiations to him, thinking it was a simple matter. It was foolish and wrong, I see now, but these town squabbles have always been particularly odious to me. As to Zynool, I only knew him by hearsay as a relative of my boy Moideen, who was very eager about the mosque. I believed it was solely on account of his zeal for the Faith, and was quite touched by his religious emotion. He saved up his pay, made no end of sacrifices to help to buy the site; but since then I've had reason to suspect that he was used as a tool by that fellow Zynool, who I know now to be a treacherous dog. He is backed up in his infamy by a shady pleader in Madras, who secretly bought the site from an unsuspecting Hindu for an old song. Then he and Zynool together sold it to the Mahomedan community for twice the sum, getting the money out of them on religious pretexts. I want to have it out with Zynool, and have summoned him more than once, but I think he must be keeping out of my way. Perhaps he guessed I was not at office to-day and went to take the measure of the new Assistant," said Mr. Worsley, with an air of discovery.

Mark, remembering the brown feet planted behind the screen door, was about to say: "He got a message from Moideen that you were not to be there. Possibly you were detained at home so that Zynool might have an opportunity of sounding my depths"; but he forebore, contenting himself by listening to this frank statement of affairs, open as the daylight, and which he contrasted with Mrs. Goldring's jaundiced narrative. The main point with him was to know that his chief was fully aware of Zynool's villainy. It was not to be wondered at that such methods could not readily be fathomed by the English gentleman, without fear and without reproach.

As he sat by his side now in the gathering dusk, a recurrence of a slumbering anxiety awakened in his mind. What was that remark as to Zynool's being a client of "a shady pleader in Madras"? Alfred Rayner had certainly mentioned his name as being a client, so it must be he! It was bitter indeed that anyone should be able so to designate Hester's husband, and yet had there not been suggestions of baseness in Rayner's conduct on more than one occasion during his own brief sojourn in Clive's Road? Could he forget the epithets he had used about the good Morpeth? Was it possible that Hester Bellairs was mated to a man quite unworthy of her? How futile was anything he could do to shield her from the thorns and briars which must encompass her path even if their roads did not lie apart? But he would be true to his promise given on the lawn of the Pinkthorpe Rectory! He would take the earliest opportunity of a visit to Clive's Road. Possibly Rayner might only be the dupe of the wily Zynool, and, on being told his true character and methods, might shake himself free of the plotter.

With hopeful thoughts Mark turned to interest himself in the project of a tour through the District which the Collector was planning for the following week.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE gay season in Madras was now at its height. Mr. Alfred Rayner hailed the opportunity of taking his charming bride everywhere, and occasions were numerous. The weather, though never deserving to be registered "cold," was pleasantly cool. Fashionable calls could be made with comfort in the middle of the day, and in the discharge of this social duty, Hester's husband kept her emphatically up to the mark. The afternoon and evening were divided into quite a distracting whirl of entertainments. Every day of the week had gymkanas, amateur concerts, dances, and dinner-parties.

Mr. and Mrs. Rayner were early guests at Government House, Mrs. Glanton's "neutral garden-party" had been followed by a speedy invitation to dinner, and there and everywhere the young barrister greeted with satisfaction, proofs that, as he expressed it, "Hester was a stunning success," and had lent that element of social prestige to his position which hitherto it had lacked, and which now he hungrily welcomed.

a pleader
is not a
barrister

He had been eager to make an early return for the varied hospitalities which as a young married couple they had received. These dinner-parties at Clive's Road were a source of no little anxiety to the young hostess, chiefly because she realised Alfred's eagerness that they should attain perfection. It is true her husband kept the direction of everything in his own hands, insisting that no obtainable luxury should be absent from his board; though before long, Hester's feminine sense had perceived that much less might have been expended, and all gracious hospitality enhanced by less ostentatious methods, recalling delightful dinner-parties at home in which neither *pâté de foie gras* nor dry champagne were component parts. But seeing Mr. Rayner's ambition was to impress the little society with his affluence, he certainly, by means of his elegant festivities, succeeded in doing so; the result being that the young couple became popular as charming entertainers, and by many were valued accordingly.

On the surface all seemed to be going well with Hester. Nevertheless, the painful incident which marked the visit of her old friend seemed to have struck the hour for the vanishing of the unreal glamour under whose pervading influence she had been conscious of being since she set foot on Indian soil. Her individuality began to assert itself, she reverted more to her home standards, and began to try to bring her days into line with them. The social amenities which belong to refined circles had always made a part of Hester's home life, though she was only beginning, when she left, to have any active share in them. But she knew enough to be aware that with her parents they had never been regarded as the be-all and end-all of existence as they seemed to be to her husband. She instinctively felt the preoccupation vulgar and selfish, though she shrank from putting that feeling into words, and felt almost guilty in thus judging. Since the morning on which Alfred had allowed himself to speak such cruel words about Mr. Morpeth, he had seemed eager to atone, had acquiesced in occasional morning visits to her friend Mrs. Fellowes, and had even accepted good-naturedly a proposal that Hester should help her with her Eurasian Girls' Club.

Though Hester had many acquaintances, Mrs. Fellowes was the only person to whom she turned as a real friend. It was indeed the pleasantest afternoon of the week for her when she drove towards the white-washed room in the crowded quarter of Vepery, where she could always reckon on a little talk with her friend before the arrival of the girls. These interests were becoming every day keener to her, and formed an antidote to the social environment of perpetual gaiety and flattery which otherwise might have proved too engrossing.

Mrs. Fellowes, having had a slight breakdown, was ordered a month's rest. During her absence Hester had undertaken to superintend the Girls' Club, though she felt herself a poor substitute for the versatile organiser. Having the need to consult her on some details, she responded all the more gladly to Mrs. Fellowes' invitation to spend a day with her in her retreat, which was within driving distance of Madras. Her husband expressed himself delighted that she should have the opportunity of making the acquaintance of a pretty bit of the Coromandel coast.

When she returned in the evening Hester was glowing in her praise of Ennore, and full of a project which she and Mrs. Fellowes had planned together.

"Won't it be delightful, Alfred, for those poor girls to have a whole day in that lovely spot?" she said joyfully, as she unfolded the plan to her husband while they sat in the verandah after dinner. "And we've decided not to drive them out in those horrid native boxes on wheels they call *jatkas*," continued Hester. "We mean to engage carriages from Waller's, and with Mrs. Fellowes to welcome them at the other end, it will all seem like fairy-land to them. Mrs. Fellowes says seventy-five rupees will quite cover the hire, so I thought I might undertake that part of it."

"Seventy-five rupees! To be good for that? Surely that was a rash promise, Hester?" exclaimed her husband with an annoyed air. "My word, I don't intend to have myself bled to that extent for those half-caste creatures."

But remembering his resolve not to criticise her efforts for them, he decided to put his objection on another footing. "The fact is, I'm none too flush of rupees at this moment. This has been a triumphant season for us, and no mistake, Hester, but one must pay for such triumphs ! ”

“ But, Alfred, I promised,” faltered Hester.

“ Then you must just wriggle out if it, my dear. Write to Mrs. Fellowes and say we've too many engagements here—can't find any spare day. She's a sensible woman, she'll read between the lines. Rupees ain't so plentiful with her.”

“ Yet just think what she does,” said Hester with dilating eyes. “ Her purse is always open ! But, Alfred, I'm really in honour bound to carry through this treat. It's too late to draw back now, you would never ask me do such a thing.”

“ To draw back ? Of course, that's precisely what you must do ! It's an absurd project ! I'll be bound, it wasn't for that sort of thing Binny's Bungalow was lent to Mrs. Fellowes ! ” said Mr. Rayner, rising as if to end the discussion.

“ It's too late to draw back now,” returned Hester decisively. “ I happened to meet two of the Vepery girls as I was driving home. I stopped the carriage to tell them of the happy day Mrs. Fellowes was planning for them——”

“ Vepery, did you say ? ” asked Alfred, turning with a start. “ I understood your class was at Royapooram.”

Though he had tacitly acquiesced in his wife's helping her friend in what he called her “ quixotic projects,” he had taken no further interest. It disturbed him not a little now to know that the meeting might contain his objectionable acquaintance, Leila Baltus, and sheer alarm drove him to more indignant remonstrances than before. At length he summoned his office-bandy, and at that unwonted hour ordered the sleepy syce to light the lamps, and drove off to town, leaving his wife in tears.

Hester, sorely vexed as she was, never for a moment contemplated abandoning the project which she decided she was in duty bound to Mrs. Fellowes, as well as to the Club girls, to carry out. Hurrying upstairs she counted her own little store which she had laid aside for Christmas presents for those at home. It proved more than the required sum.

When her landau appeared next forenoon to take her for a round of visits, she told the syce to drive her instead to Waller's Stables, where the hire of the required carriages was speedily arranged. She resolved to tell her husband on the first opportunity that the carriage difficulty was now solved, and to try, when she did so, to hide the soreness which still rankled in her heart concerning it.

There was an air of apology in Mr. Rayner's manner when he returned from the High Court that afternoon. He evidently did not forget that he had lost his temper on the previous evening, and his wife hoped this state of mind might make it easier for her to broach the vexed question.

This she was about to do as they sat in the verandah after dinner, when her husband turned to her with a gracious smile.

"You're looking lovely to-night, Hester! Your day at Ennore yesterday has brought back the English roses to your cheeks. Fine birds deserve fine feathers, shall we say? See what I've brought to adorn your lovely white neck!"

He opened an elegant leather case and held up triumphantly a beautiful diamond pendant.

"Oh, Alfred," gasped Hester, after a moment's silence. "Have you actually got that for me? Oh, I can't—I won't have it! You must give it back! You will return it?"

"Return it, forsooth! A nice suggestion when an affectionate husband presents his wife with a gift! Besides, Hester, you really haven't the correct toilette without jewels. That trumpery gold cross is the only thing you have to wear. It's been my despair at all our parties to see you without diamonds when the frowsy dowagers are resplendent with them—and the young brides into the bargain. This pendant is a simple necessity. I'll add a tiara when I can."

"Never! I wouldn't wear one for the world! And if you want to make me happy you'll return this. Oh, how could you waste money on it, especially"—she paused with a little catch in her voice—"especially since you said you couldn't afford to give me the rupees to pay for those carriages though I told you I had promised them."

"Well, don't you see I had it in my mind to give you this surprise—and a nice reception you've given it!"

Mr. Rayner snapped the lid of the elegant case with an angry air. "Anyhow the diamonds are yours and you must wear them," he added, throwing the case into her lap. "I'm not going to be made a fool of, taking them back with my tail between my legs like a whipped puppy. Why, it would soon get out that I am a henpecked husband, and so I am, between one thing or another," he ended sulkily, and betook himself to the perusal of the *Madras Mail*.

Hester, though she hated concealment, felt that this was not the moment to announce that the carriages for Ennore had been duly arranged for, and that she would have to go next day to help Mrs. Fellowes to entertain the Eurasian girls. Neither could she, at this moment, make any further remonstrance concerning the foolish gift. She would watch for an early opportunity when her husband was in a better mood, and try to persuade him to return it to the jewellers. The pendant was, in itself, vulgar and ostentatious. She felt she could never wear it. She smiled when she pictured her mother's face if she saw the flaring jewel upon her young daughter's neck. Mrs. Bellairs disapproved of jewellery for girls, even for young matrons, and her prejudice was so well known in her circle that among Hester's numerous wedding gifts there had been a marked absence of trinkets of any kind, and her husband had more than once expressed his regret that his wife should be unadorned save by the little antique gold cross.

Perhaps she had been unkind in making such a determined stand, Hester thought now. But when she recalled her husband's assurance that they were spending so largely that even seventy-five rupees would prove a strain on their month's finances, she felt reassured that she would only be acting as a true wife should in urging that the gaudy gift should again take its place among the jeweller's wares ; and, if she remained firm, surely Alfred would not force it upon her.

CHAPTER XV.

NEXT morning, soon after Mr. Rayner left for the High Court, a peon arrived with a chit from him to tell Hester that he had been summoned to the Mofussil on pressing business, and would probably be absent for a couple of days, and directing that his dressing-boy should bring his kit to the railway station. Hester felt disappointed that his unlooked-for departure deprived her of the opportunity she desired to tell him that all was now arranged for the projected trip to Ennore, which was to be announced by her to the girls of the Club that evening.

Mrs. Fellowes' modest room was beginning to be a familiar place to the Eurasian girls. She had not followed any hard-and-fast plan in conducting the meetings further than making it her object to draw forth these young women who lolled listlessly about the pandals of their pent-up homes, to endeavour to fill their hearts with new thoughts, and their hands with useful work. "The pioneer meeting," Mr. Morpeth gleefully called it, no effort of quite a similar kind ever having been attempted before for the betterment of the aimless lives in the purlieus of the Eurasian quarter. Mrs. Fellowes and her "lieutenant," as Hester called herself, proved inventive in happy methods in which cheerful work and rational amusement intermingled. The older lady, with unwearied skill and patience, shaped useful garments for the girls, and tried to persuade them to substitute neat sewing for their careless methods of fixing them up anyhow. Interesting books were always provided for reading aloud, as well as a growing library fed by Mr. Morpeth. A piano, the gift of an unknown donor, had been lately introduced, greatly enhancing the popularity of the gathering, which was only beginning to be known ; and Mrs. Fellowes was always on the outlook for new recruits.

The end of the hour had come on this afternoon, and Hester was divulging Mrs. Fellowes' invitation to Ennore to the assembled girls when she was interrupted by a new arrival.

A young woman, attired more gaudily than was usual to the "Friendly," had pushed open the door and taken her seat without note or comment, and was gazing intently at Hester. The new-comer was the object of much whispering and many scowls from the frequenters of the meeting. Hester presumed that she wished to become a member, but her aspect was so unconciliatory that she felt some hesitation in addressing her, and applied for information to a girl standing by her side. All she could learn was that the girl had only recently appeared in Vepery and was unknown to her ; the stranger, however, seemed to have sharp ears.

"If it's my name you want," she said, "I'm not ashamed of it as some might be of theirs. Mine's Miss Leila Baltus ! "

A displeased murmur went round the meeting, and all eyes were directed to Miss Baltus, who tossed her head defiantly.

"We are glad to see you," began Hester with quiet courtesy. "We welcome everyone to our meeting." She paused, but resumed, "With regard to Mrs. Fellowes' kind invitation, we shall have to restrict our number to those already on our list."

Approving nods from the company acknowledged the reasonableness of Mrs. Rayner's remark. A girl, who evidently knew more about the stranger than the one to whom Hester had applied for information, said in a loud whisper to her neighbour :

"Cheap on Leila for her impudence ! She's got thatt awfulee high and mighty since she went to Calcutta—and thatt spiteful too!"

Stung by hearing her name, and no doubt ruffled that she was not even to have the chance of declining the proposed treat, Leila Baltus rose, dropping her showy parasol noisily on the floor as she did so. She made her way towards the door, saying enigmatically:

"I'll take my leave now. I've seen *you*, and that's enough for one afternoon!"

She hissed out the words and rolled her dark eyes unpleasantly on the sweet young English face. "There will be a second meeting, or my name's not Leila Baltus! A Friendlee Society, forsooth!" Her cheap skirt with its papery rustle swished along the floor as she made her exit.

A disapproving murmur ran through the ranks of the loyal partisans, but the incident was soon forgotten amid the pleasant preoccupation over the trip on the following morning.

On Hester's mind, however, it left an unpleasant recollection. She hoped the mutinous intruder might prove more amenable to Mrs. Fellowes' influence at some future time, and that they might one day be able to get nearer to this embittered-looking girl with the beautiful eyes. To have had such a bellicose element in to-morrow's party would have been jarring, to say the least of it, and unfair to the others. It was doubtless hearing of the pleasure which she was not to share, however, that had made the girl so rude and unmannerly. Noting her name in her pocket-book, Hester resolved to consult with her wise friend what should be their attitude towards Miss Leila Baltus.

The bungalow where Mrs. Fellowes was staying belonged to an old and distinguished firm of Madras merchants. The principals of the firm had used it on occasion as a country house before South Indian hills became so easy of access; and often now they put it at the disposal of friends. To many a young couple had Binny's Bungalow at Ennore proved a place of dear romance; to many a weary veteran a haven of quiet rest.

There was a peculiar fairyism about Ennore. It seemed to nestle in all its sylvan beauty on the borders of an inland lake whose slopes were fringed by cocoanut palms, dense glossy shrubs, and odoriferous spice plants; while graceful bamboos flung their interlacing tendrils all about. Great water-lilies spread themselves over the surface of the water, and the water-fowl floated or skimmed over its sparkling ripples. A trim, white-sailed boat, with an ancient, white-bearded serang in attendance, was always at the disposal of the bungalow guests. Afloat on the placid waters of the lake and sheltered by its leafy borders, every object tended to convince one that it was entirely an inland sheet of water, till suddenly you might, perchance, be startled by the shrill cry of a sea-gull, or the fierce roll of the near breakers would fall on your astounded ear. You would then glance across the sunny ripples of the lake, and perceive with amazement that a strip of sand was all that divided the peaceful backwater from the great Bay of Bengal; so white and thin were its grains that they might be put through an hour-glass without refinement, and so narrow was the strip that, in a minute, a child could run across it. On one side light zephyrs dance on the tiny ripples; on the other, the waters roll in mighty waves dashed to the shore in tossing, writhing floods of whitest foam.

At the upper end of this long stretch of smooth sand stands the gallant little bungalow with its trim, green-painted *persiennes*, trellised verandahs, and its breezy "up-stair" room, surrounded by some sturdy date palms, and sheltered from the elements by a belt of hardy jungle trees which break the fury of the gales.

The one ample sitting-room of the bungalow from which branched various bedrooms and dressing-rooms, seemed to Hester the most English-looking room of a certain type which she had seen since coming to the East. Perhaps it suggested the old-fashioned innparlour more than anything intimately domestic. On its walls hung numerous quaint-coloured prints of English hunting scenes. Its sofas, planted against the walls, offered luxurious rest; while its big dining-table and rows of chairs gave it a hospitable air. The many windows at each end of the long room disclosed impartially the inland beauties of the backwater, and the expanse of the great restless ocean. On one side of the building the favoured small guests, who found themselves making holiday at the bungalow, might float their mimic ships in safety; and on the other, beyond the mass of seething foam, the stateliest ships of the world might be seen sailing over the great deep.

Hester had driven out early to help Mrs. Fellowes with preparations for her numerous guests, and now stood by the side of the hostess, giving the girls a smiling welcome to Ennore. It soon proved that the pre-arranged programme for their entertainment was superfluous, so charmed were the guests with the unwonted surroundings in which they found themselves. Some groups sought the long narrow strip of sunlit sand by the "many dashing ocean shore," to search for the rare shells to be found there, thrown up by the tide, retreating with shrieks of laughter when the curling waves dashed their spray upon them. Others were more fascinated by the peaceful charm of the backwater, and made expeditions in the boat to the further end of the lake, bent on securing trophies of greenery for the decoration of their dull Vepery parlours. The white-haired, nut-brown serang had many freights of passengers that day, and more than one sensational shriek reached the ladies who sat in the verandah watching all the ongoings.

A plentiful tiffin brought the guests indoors for a time, but they were eager to be out again, even under the hot afternoon sun, to explore the sylvan brakes or saunter on the sunny sands.

"Do you know, Mrs. Fellowes," said Hester, "I begin to feel rather an impostor! I told myself that

I must come to-day to help you to entertain your guests, and now I find I'm doing nothing but hugely enjoying myself ! "

She lay back happily in one of the luxurious teakwood arm-chairs which were a special and memorable feature of the verandah.

" Well, my dear, I'm only too glad you are having a nice rest," returned Mrs. Fellowes, glancing at her with a kindly smile. " I thought you looked rather jaded and worried when you arrived, but this air is wonderfully soothing and restoring."

" I confess I was rather worried last night," said Hester, with a sigh. " How would you act if you were suddenly presented with a costly gift by your husband which you neither admired nor wished ? " she asked, deciding she would take counsel of the woman Mr. Morpeth called a " wise saint." She proceeded to tell her of the difficulty she felt when suddenly confronted with the gorgeous diamond pendant in its elegant case and been asked to accept this distasteful gift, and what her attitude had been.

" Oh, my dear, I do think such a prompt refusal was a little bit rough on your husband, though I sympathise with you in the main, for I know you don't care for jewels. But these matters must be handled very delicately. For instance, I think if Joe had taken it into his head to present me with something he would be much hurt if I declined to accept his offering ; but then, to be sure, it would not be a costly gift as yours is——"

" Diamonds of the first water, Alfred described them," said Hester, shaking her head.

" Why, they must have cost a fortune ! But your husband is no doubt able to afford them—he must be a very rich man."

A knot rose in Hester's throat. Since her husband was so demonstratively rich, why had he so irritatingly declined the little boon which she had craved ? Good taste and loyalty forbade her sharing with her friend the main source of her discomfort in having had the costly gift pressed upon her. Mrs. Fellowes, however, perceived that she was deeply perturbed concerning the incident, but she felt she could not encourage Hester to persevere in her determination to have the pendant returned. That course would certainly have the effect of widening the little rift which seemed already vibrating.

"Just you ask your husband to put the jewel in his safe to keep it from thieves, and, when it is stowed away like that, you will both forget to give it an airing, and you won't have to bedeck yourself with it."

"A capital idea! That will please Alfred, and will save me more words about the matter."

"Only," Mrs. Fellowes added, "you might stipulate that in future your husband's affection would be more valued if it did not take the form of costly gifts. Your husband must be very rich," repeated Mrs. Fellowes, this time with an interrogative note in her voice and a glance at Hester. "Young barristers out here are seldom able to present their wives with diamonds of the first water."

"No, I don't think Alfred is what could be called rich. But you know he has an addition to what he earns—an allowance from his people. I forget how much it is, but he told father. Both his parents died when he was a baby, and an aunt and her husband brought him up. His uncle Rayner had been in the same firm as his father, and I think Alfred has still a share in the business, but I don't interest myself in these matters. I have a very unbusiness-like mind," she added with a sigh. "I'm afraid my husband thinks me quite hopeless in that department, though I am vain enough to believe that I could now manage the domestic side better—at least more economically—than he does."

"But you do, don't you? Why, when the Colonel and I dined with you lately I recollect one of Mr. Rayner's bachelor friends said chaffingly: 'It's easy to see your Eve's hand in this Paradise, Rayner!' And I remember I quite loved your husband when I heard him say with an air of glee, 'Yes, isn't she a splendid housekeeper?' "

"A splendid housekeeper! Oh, Alfred must have been joking! I only wish he would let me have a try! Of course everything was very new and strange to me at first, but I've found my way about in many things now. I'm no more an absolute 'griffin.' For one thing, I'm quite sure I could manage much more economically than we're doing now. Alfred admits we are spending a great deal——"

Hester's voice faltered as she recalled the humiliating context in which he had made the unexpected admission.

"Well, my dear, look here," said Mrs. Fellowes in an emphatic tone, after a little silence. "As the price of your concession in keeping the diamonds, suppose you stipulate for a freer hand on the housekeeping reins, especially since your husband admits that these expenses are large. I would strongly advise you to arrange this."

Mrs. Fellowes called to mind the Colonel having more than once remarked that the young Rayners must be spending lacs between horse-flesh and elegant dinners. She felt glad that this talk had given her the opportunity of offering some advice on the subject to the young wife whom she had come to admire and love for other qualities than merely her personal charm.

The bright day had faded. That magical, and, in Eastern lands, momentary interval between light and darkness had fallen. The girls were at length gathered in the brightly-lit sitting-room, having an evening meal before starting on their homeward way. Their cheerful faces and happy laughter told how greatly they had enjoyed their day.

"We've just been awfulee happy," said one spokeswoman. "'Twill be a tale to tell for many a day in Vepery!"

"And won't thatt cat, Leila Baltus, be spiteful when she hears wot a good time we've had, and her kept out," remarked another.

"Oh, but that is not a kind source of satisfaction, Rosa," said Mrs. Fellowes, looking at the girl, and shaking her head in gentle disapproval. "Who is Leila Baltus?" she asked in an undertone, turning to Hester; but the question was unheard in the general bustle of departure.

The last carriageful was now driving off, and a shrill chorus of expressions of gratitude mingled with the sea sounds which were more audible now that the darkness had fallen. Long afterwards Hester remembered this night, and conjured up a vivid picture of this shore of the Bay of Bengal, the sweet placid face of the "wise saint," the eager groups of amber-faced girls with the evidence of a happy innocent day written on every feature, and the background of the brightly-lit parlour, while a stone's throw away rolled the darkened waters of the great restless ocean.

Hester, in her husband's absence, had agreed to remain the night with her friend. Colonel Fellowes appeared presently, having driven out to see his wife, and a pleasant evening followed. When Hester mounted the narrow staircase to the delightful bedroom assigned to her on the flat roof, she felt it was long since such an entirely happy day had been her portion. With its many doors opening on the leads, this room was an abode of luxury on hot Indian plains. Here no drowsy punkah-wallah had to be roused by the sleepless victim to pull the weary wind-fan! The sea breeze wooed one to sleep even on the hottest nights, and through the many doors open to the dark blue vault, one could lie in bed and watch the stars come out, tracing whole constellations from one's downy pillow to the music of the wild waves.

CHAPTER XVI.

On the same afternoon as Hester was enjoying the many-sided pleasures of her day at Ennoré, Alfred Rayner was stepping from the train at the trim little railway station of Puranapore. He looked less brisk than ordinarily, and did not seem disposed to claim the simultaneous attentions of all the native officials in his usual self-assertive manner, but stood glancing up and down the platform with an undecided air. In fact the green flag had been waved, and the train by which he had arrived had started on its onward way, but still he seemed in no hurry to proceed. Presently the station-master approached him, and salaaming, inquired which Dorai he was on his way to visit, no carriage having appeared from the English cantonment.

Mr. Rayner was in a very uncommunicative mood. He did not disclaim any purpose of visiting one of the English residents, nor did he indicate whither he was bound. Suddenly he picked up his bag, for on second thoughts he had dismissed his dressing-boy at the Madras station, and strode off on foot, much to the surprise of the station-master, who was a comparative stranger and did not even know him by sight. The scowling Hindu ticket-collector quickly enlightened him.

"That's La'yer Rayner that done bobbery about that mosque," he remarked, and proceeded to denounce the barrister in no flattering terms, prophesying that he had reappeared to hatch fresh mischief with the plotting Zynool.

The object of these unfavourable comments was meanwhile making his way among the narrow crowded streets of the old town, and in one of the unloveliest of these he stood glancing up at a house, the front aspect of which was little more than a blank wall, its peeling chunam giving it a dreary, weather-stained appearance. Its few slits of windows looked down on the street like pairs of suspicious eyes, and its low door seemed as if it could not admit anyone of even average stature, though it gave daily ingress and egress to the ponderous figure of Zynool Sahib. At this low portal Mr. Rayner stood, tentatively looking up at the narrow windows.

"Perhaps I should have wired to announce my coming! One never knows whether an impromptu descent or not is best with these beggars. If I had warned Zynool, it would only have given him a loophole for escape if he had a mind for any reason to dodge me. His letter showed he was mad over his failure to annex that idiot, Cheveril, and he seemed actually to blame me for it!"

He had ample time for his soliloquy while he waited for a response to his knock. At length he heard the withdrawing of heavy bolts within and the door was opened. On his inquiry if Zynool Sahib was at home, a suspicious-looking servant led him along a dark, narrow passage from which he passed into a courtyard ablaze with sunshine and gay with flowering shrubs. In the centre a fountain played and goldfish disported themselves in its sparkling basin. Rows of windows with leaded panes of glass looked into the court, some of these were being hurriedly closed now, though the visitor was able to catch a glimpse of moving forms within and even of faces peering furtively down upon him.

"The harem, of course," muttered Mr. Rayner, with a scornful smile. "No, ladies, you need not fear, I'll not peep, I've no wish to anger your lord and master!"

After a little pause another servant appeared; he was evidently of a higher grade, for he pushed the other aside rudely, saying:

"Your honour will follow me! The Sahib will see!"

The visitor was led along more passages and finally shown into a large room furnished entirely after English fashions of an unrefined sort. The badly stuffed sofa and chairs covered with crimson plush looked most uninviting. On the floor was spread a crude coloured Brussels carpet, while lovely Persian rugs lay huddled on the verandah outside. The only ornament in the room was a huge musical box.

"So this is Zynool's idea of comfort! I wonder what Hester would think of this," muttered Mr. Rayner, flinging his sun-topee on the garish plush table-cloth, its neutral colour giving a relieving touch which he noted almost with comfort as he seated himself on the hard sofa. He had never before penetrated into Zynool's home, having most frequently arranged meetings with him in Madras, or, when business necessitated a visit to Puranapore, Zynool had always directed him to a room near the railway station which seemed at his disposal.

Presently the heavy curtain at the other end of the room from which he had entered was pushed aside by a fat brown hand bedecked with sparkling rings, and the master of the house stood before him, making less deferential salaam than usual, and with a frown on his face. Rayner also discerned from a certain flicker of his eyelids which half covered his beady eyes that Zynool was not in the best of tempers.

"Worse luck for me," he groaned inwardly.

"You give your humble slave one surprise, La'yer Rayner," said Zynool, licking his coarse red lips, as he disposed his heavy person on the edge of one of the plush-covered chairs. "No chit, no wire, no nossing!" he jerked, looking querulously at his visitor as he spoke.

"Upon my word, Zynool, I ought to apologise for my coming upon you in this unceremonious manner," returned Mr. Rayner, assuming his most conciliatory tone, "but we're such friends, you and I, I thought I might risk an impromptu visit. What a beautiful room you have here—quite English, I declare!"

"Ha, it pleases your Honour then!" said Zynool, visibly brightening. "This apartment has just been lately furnished all from Oakes & Company, Madras,

—all perfect English—Oakes' man done assure. The carpet too, is it not a beautee?" he added, casting an admiring glance on the hideous tints.

"Perfectly lovely—such good taste! A lucky man you are, Sahib, to be able to order all these things—and to pay for them too!"

Here Mr. Rayner gave an ostentatious sigh which, however, was lost on his host, who seized the opportunity of giving vent to a rankling grievance.

"Yes, it was in your humble slave's heart to invite your friend, the new Assistant-Collector, to come and have coffee in this lovelee English room, and also to bestow many favours on that young man till he scorned me in such wise as I made known to your Honour in my chit. I expressed to your ear how his treatment was like hot charcoal thrown in my face."

"Yes, very ungrateful on Cheveril's part! But you must bear in mind, Sahib, that he's only a griffin, not an old diplomat like you. You may find him more promising next time. You and he and I will be drinking coffee together in this beautiful room, yet—take my word for it," said Mr. Rayner, in an encouraging tone as he eyed the Mahomedan closely.

"Nevere," replied Zynool, with a groan. "That one is not like Dorai Printer. I take measure of that young man, veree quick. No favour for your humble slave in that compound."

"Oh, you never can tell! And now I'll make a confidant of you, Zynool. That young man is a very particular friend of my lady. He will be coming to see us in Madras very soon. I shall not fail to tell him what a splendid fellow you are, and what a loyal servant of the Empire, and of the lovely English room you have here," Rayner continued, keeping his eye on the heavy face to watch the effect of his words, for he had a matter important to transact which had brought him to Puranapore, though it was not pressing legal business as he had indicated to his wife.

"The young man is a friend of your lady, say you?

That is good! Then, La'yer Rayner, the road is straight. Your mem-sahib must doubtless do your Honour's will?" suggested Zynool, with an ugly leer.

Not having an evasive reply ready on the tip of his tongue, Rayner again applied himself to admiring his gaudy surroundings, though he almost regretted his recurring to the topic, when Zynool began to rub his fat hands gleefully, saying:

"But this is not the only English room I have on my premises. Come and see!" and drawing aside the portière he disclosed a bedroom, where a shiny new brass bedstead of the commonest order stood, surrounded by the regulation furnishings. "This, too, all from Oakes & Company, Madras, quite English and veree costlee"; and he rubbed his hands in childish glee as he gazed about on his possessions.

"By Jove, what a grand bed, I've a mind to repose on it," exclaimed Rayner, with well-simulated admiration.

"And would your Honour realee do your humble slave the joy of taking repose on thatt bed this veree night? If so, all can be arranged and quicklee too," cried Zynool with enthusiasm.

Mr. Rayner was considerably taken aback by the proposal to sleep in a native house. He had intended to travel a station or two down the line when he had finished his business with the Mussulman, and put up at the bungalow of a bachelor friend. But this eager offer of hospitality was not to be lightly refused, following as it did Zynool's irate mood, and he decided that prudence demanded a gracious compliance with the request.

Zynool, obviously delighted with the success of his suggestion, hurried off, all importance, to make arrangements for the entertainment of the English guest. The news instantly circulated from basement to housetop that the English sahib was to honour the house of his client, though half-an-hour previously his arrival had seemed to incense its master, and make confusion throughout the household.

Mr. Rayner's relations with the Mussulman had been of more than two years' standing. In fact Zynool Sahib had been one of the young barrister's earliest clients, and owing to Rayner's astuteness and daring he had been piloted round at least one ugly corner. If the truth must be told, since then the lawyer had more than once thrust his client into hot water. The pair had taken shares together in various doubtful ventures, at Rayner's instigation, encouraged by high interest, and had been markedly unsuccessful, so that when Zynool informed him that a really good investment was going a-begging in the shape of a piece of land in Puranapore, Rayner lent a ready ear. The land being the property of a Hindu, Zynool explained that he must keep entirely in the background, but was eager, for reasons of his own, to aid the purchase by underhand methods. The result was that the land in question became the property of Alfred Rayner, to pass shortly after into the hands of the Moslem community for double the price which the lawyer gave for it. Thus the mosque which was now such a bone of contention came into being, growing with the rapidity of Jack's beanstalk. Before the Hindus began to realise what a perpetual source of annoyance it was likely to prove, the Mahomedans were shouting their morning and evening prayer-calls from its jerry-built minaret. Zynool rubbed his fat hands with joy at the success of his plot to snub the Hindus, while Rayner's bag of rupees for the price of the site was a godsend to him, and had tided him through many months. But these ill-gotten gains had all melted away during the past season's extravagances. More serious still, the shares, which had seemed so promising, were threatening to pay no further dividends, and calls were looming in the distance. It was this black outlook which had brought the young lawyer to the house of the Mahomedan this afternoon, not indeed to announce to his client the threatened failure of their joint investments—that, he decided, must be kept in the dark—but to see whether he could negotiate a much needed loan on easier terms than those of the Madras *soukars*. He considered it therefore worth the odiousness of being condemned to spend an evening in the crimson plush drawing-room and the discomfort of a night in the shining brass bedstead, if he could work his host up to that pitch of smiling compliance which would make his request an easier task than it seemed likely to be during the first few minutes of his call.

It was, however, with the cheque for five thousand rupees in his pocket-book, albeit with even a greater loss of self-respect than his dealings with the wily Mussulman had hitherto engendered, that Alfred Rayner stepped out at the low doorway in the weather-stained wall next morning. His host had ordered his gaudy little chariot to be in readiness to drive him to the railway station. It waited now as Zynool stood salaaming on the narrow pavement.

As Mr. Rayner was stepping into the carriage he caught sight of two Englishmen passing along the head of the street. They walked slowly. One was a short, broad-shouldered man, who was endeavouringto hold a white-covered umbrella over the head of his younger and taller companion as they laughed and chatted together.

"There goes Dr. Campbell, mine enemee," said Zynool, with a fierce scowl, "and the osser is that haughtee young man. What a pity he did not see your Honour at the house of your humble slave here," he added, with an air of disappointment.

Rayner had retreated into the depths of the bandy before he ventured to make any reply.

"So that's Dr. Campbell, is it? Not a very formidable looking person! I should say, Zynool, that you're a match for that little man with the hollow chest," he said, with a careless laugh as he settled himself among the cushions, while Zynool's dark face filled the window.

Rayner was longing to ask him the question which he was anxiously asking himself. "Had Mark caught sight of him at the Mussulman's door?" He fervently hoped not, and made an absent, formal salaam as he took leave of his host.

He congratulated himself that the two gentlemen, being on foot, were probably going to the dispensary while their carriage waited near, and that there would be no risk of his meeting them. He was therefore not a little chagrined when the first person he saw standing on the platform was the Assistant-Collector.

Perceiving that an encounter was inevitable, Rayner went forward with a gracious smile.

"Who would have thought of seeing you here, Cheveril!"

"Why, I should rather say, who would have thought of seeing you at our little Puranapore," responded Mark, with that direct look in his eye which had already annoyed Rayner more than once.

"To a dead certainty he saw me at Zynool's door," thought Rayner, who replied lightly, "Business, sir, business! Trying to get that fellow Zynool to pay up what he owes me. He happened to be one of my Puranapore clients before my last furlough. We barristers don't always get paid in advance, I assure you!"

Mark recalled with discomfort Mr. Worsley's remark as to Zynool having been helped by a "shady pleader," but he was glad to dismiss the topic for the present by polite enquiries after Mrs. Rayner.

"Oh, Hester is as fit as a fiddle! Going in for no end of dissipation, and still keeps her English roses," her husband replied briskly. "Come and see for yourself, Cheveril! My wife was a bit disappointed that you declined all our invitations."

"Please tell Mrs. Rayner that I have not been a day absent since I joined, or I should have taken a run to Madras to see my friends there."

"Yes, I believe the Collector is rather of the slave-driving order. Between touring and office work he grinds his subs. pretty hard—so Printer used to tell me."

"That's not a fair representation by any means," said Mark quickly. "Touring and office work are both in the day's routine, and I like both."

"Lucky man," said the lawyer, with more honest conviction than his words generally implied as he glanced half enviously, half admiringly, at the strong, reliant face of the young civilian which told of faithful days and peaceful nights.

"Oh, by the way, Rayner, let me introduce you to our doctor! He is taking a run to Madras to see a case he has in the hospital there. You'll enjoy Campbell's talk. He's an awfully bright fellow," Mark added, thinking that such an acquaintance might be salutary for this shifty looking man. He was glancing round in search of the doctor whom he saw talking to a Hindu official.

"Oh, thanks, no," replied Rayner, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I've got a brief to study in the train. I must deny myself the pleasure of Dr. Campbell's acquaintance."

He was about to hurry off to take his seat when he remembered that he had made no definite arrangement concerning the suggested visit to Clive's Road. "You'll come and put up with us for Christmas, of course, Cheveril? It will be Hester's first Christmas here as well as yours—jolly to spend it together! Shall I tell her of the pleasure in store?"

"I'm certainly counting on seeing Mrs. Rayner then. Do please say so with all kind words from me. But I shall be putting up at the Club. Mr. Worsley has asked me to be his guest there, and to help him to entertain a friend he expects to arrive then."

"Ah, well, one must keep on the right side of one's chief, of course. You're a shrewd man, Cheveril! I'll be able to assure your friend Hester that you're shaping-in beautifully. At all events you'll give us one evening at Clive's Road?"

Mark cordially assented and turned away to make a parting salute to the doctor as the train was moving off.

CHAPTER XVII.

HESTER awaited her husband's return home with some uneasiness. She wondered how he would receive the disclosure that the day at Ennore was an accomplished fact. Being neither secretive nor wanting in courage, she would have much preferred to have explained previous to the expedition that she had felt obliged to negotiate about the carriages, and had already paid for their hire. She was therefore pleasantly taken by surprise on the morning after Mr. Rayner's return, when they sat together at early tea under the shade of the banyan tree, when he suddenly turned to her with a penitent air, saying:

"Look here, Hester, I behaved abominably about the hire of those bandies for your *protégées*. Forgive my hasty temper, sweet wife, and as a proof of your full forgiveness accept this." He stooped down to kiss her and laid a crisp note in her hand.

"A hundred rupees! Oh, Alfred, but that's a fortune—much more than the cost of the carriages! You remember the hire was only to be seventy-five rupees—and they're paid. Even the bill has been filed. The first on the little file mother slipped into the netting of my portmanteau! 'The only way to keep accounts straight is to use these,' she said. And it does give one a sense of satisfaction when one slips the bill into the file 'Paid!'"

"Oh, well, as to that, there's no sense in wishing to pay one's bills before they're a day old—that doesn't pay, in fact! Tradesmen reckon on their bills clinging to the file 'unpaid' for some time, and charge accordingly. But as far as the present trifle is concerned it doesn't matter. As to the surplus—

the extra twenty-five rupees—keep them for chiffons, my dear ! "

" I know well what I want to do with every anna of my treasure trove ! You haven't asked how I came to have money to pay for the carriages, Alfred ! It was really the remains of a little store of sovereigns in my dressing-case ; I've been hoarding it for Christmas presents to send home, and now, like the story of the widow's cruise of oil, it has multiplied. I shall be able to send for those alluring hawkers. I've always tried to turn away my eyes from beholding their wares when they spread them out on the verandah, conscious that I wasn't an intending customer."

" Oh, but you needn't be so sensitive ! They don't in the least mind as long as they are allowed to spread them on the verandah. But if you really want the hawkers you'd better give orders to Veeraswamy to summon the crew and have a bargaining. Mind, about half they ask is the real value of the article. I expect you'll get dreadfully imposed on."

" I hope not, for I'm anxious to get the worth of every rupee. There are so many to send to. I must find something for father, though that won't be so easy. About mother, I'll have no difficulty. But, Alfred, is there nobody you want to send a Christmas-box to in the homeland ? " asked Hester, with kind eyes resting on her husband.

" Oh, no doubt there are sundry who would accept one with pleasure. But you know, I'm a relationless being, Hester. Now that Aunt Flo is gone, there isn't a soul belonging to me. It's better than having undesirable relatives, isn't it ? What a horror that would be, to be sure ! But I'm glad you've thought of the Rectory people. I owe them heaps, Hester, for having allowed me to carry off the only daughter of the house—and such a daughter ! And you're having a good time, are you not, dearest ? Young Stapleton was just remarking the other day at the Club that you were the prettiest and most popular bride of the season.

I'm so glad you're such a glorious success," he added, taking her hand caressingly, and raising it to his lips. "I'm going to write to your mother one day soon, and tell her how well her transplanted English rose is doing here!"

"Don't boast about me in that strain, Alfred! It would not be convincing to mother, though I know she'd love to have a letter from you. But that nonsense of young Stapleton's, for instance, she would positively dislike," returned Hester with decision, for she was eager to prevent this husband of hers, whom her father half in fun maintained to be still "an unknown quantity," from betraying any trace of the curious little selfish vanity concerning his own possessions, simply because they were his, which he was apt to show at times. Loving him as she did in spite of his faults, she desired like a true wife to screen them from all eyes, especially from the sensitive, high-souled, innermost circle of her home.

"All right, Hester, I'll submit the letter for your approval. You can expunge all that you think would not go down in that quarter," said her husband lightly.

Hester, in the fullness of her heart, thought now to enliven their talk by giving her husband some passages from the happy hours spent at Ennore, and began to expatiate on the delight of the girls on its varied attractions, and how all the arrangements were carried out without a single hitch, Waller having sent roomy carriages and good horses, and as he promised, "done the Misses proud!"

"But, by the way, there did threaten to be a little fiasco," she said, recalling an incident she had half forgotten. "I really must tell you about that, Alfred. It was at the afternoon meeting the day before. I was telling the girls the secret of the treat which I thought had been well kept by those two I met on the road. It must have leaked out somewhere, for just as I was unfolding it, the door was pushed open and a striking-looking girl stepped in and sat down. Some rather sulky glances were directed rowards her, I noticed, and seemed to me to ask, ' Is this new-comer to share the privilege of the faithful attenders of the class ? ' I thought I must at once clear the atmosphere and begin to explain that Mrs. Fellowes' invitation was limited to a number, and so exclude any hope the interloper might have had of being included. I made some remark, intended really to soften the possible disappointment, but the girl answered very haughtily and rudely, and after some words which I couldn't catch, she flounced out of the room, banging the door after her. But we must get hold of her again ! I must set Mrs. Fellowes on her track, she has a magical influence over these girls. I don't think the girl liked the look of me—she assumed such a black and scowling air. Perhaps I put it rather awkwardly when I explained that she couldn't share in the treat. Yes, poor thing, I must see what can be done ! Leila Baltus, that was her name ! Rather pretty name, isn't it ? "

Mr. Rayner had been listening somewhat absently to Hester's narration as he scanned the last evening's paper. At the mention of the familiar name he started so that Hester exclaimed :

" Are the mosquitoes attacking you, Alfred ? I thought you boasted that they neglected you, bestowing all their attention on poor me ! "

He was glad that the sheets of the *Madras Mail* were concealing his face at the moment.

" Leila Baltus," he repeated slowly, after a moment's pause, in which he had succeeded in steadying his voice to a tone of unconcern. " You surely don't call that a pretty name ! Shows what a griffin you are ! Why, it's one of those hateful half-caste names—as common as mud, and as ugly," he added, though he was aware that he only knew one family of the name. Presently he threw the newspaper to the ground with angry swish, and jumping up confronted Hester, saying, in a voice trembling with the passion engendered by fear :

" I'll tell you what it is, Hester ! I'll not have you crawled upon by those vile half-castes at every turn—dangerous liars and thieves, every one of them! You must really seek your pleasure elsewhere than with such low associates. In fact, the way you're going on is quite compromising to me. Here am I struggling for an assured position at the bar, while you are haunting the East-Indian dens of Vepery. It isn't loyal of you! You shan't ruin me by such ongoings—that's the long and the short of it!"

He stood in front of his wife's lounging chair with uplifted arm and a fierce look in his eyes which Hester had never seen there before. She grew white as her morning robe; there was pain and wonder in her eyes, but no fear, as she gazed at him. In a moment he dropped his arm, bit his lip savagely, and putting his hands in his pockets walked with slow, unsteady steps towards the house.

Hester covered her face with her hands, and sat for some time in troubled, silent meditation. Then she glanced up with a gentle, subdued smile.

"How foolish I have been! He was so happy and kind a few minutes ago when he gave me that money, and was not even angry when I told him I had paid for the carriage hire. And then I must needs go on and chatter about the treat, though I ought to have remembered that he detested the whole subject. Poor Alfred, no wonder his temper got the better of him! Why, have I not seen my father more than a little ruffled when he was made to listen to bothering domestic things? And don't I remember mother saying: 'We must protect your father from this,' when any sudden worry arose? And here I am, her daughter, showing no more sense than a magpie! I've myself to blame for this outbreak of Alfred's, and must go and make *l'amende honorable!*"

She rose quickly from her chair and hurried across the brown turf towards the verandah. Her husband was, however, engaged with a client in the writing-room, and when they met again at breakfast she was thankful to see he had quite regained his good-humour. He smilingly introduced his visitor, a young subaltern from Palaveram, whom he had invited to stay to breakfast.

The youth's resemblance to her brother at once drew Hester to him. His fair wavy hair, his blue eyes, and the shape of his forehead reminded her strongly of Charlie; but there the likeness ended, she thought, as she gazed pitifully at the blanched, haggard face, the dull, faded eyes, and the lines of care about the sensitive mouth.

"Poor boy, he's got into trouble, no doubt! But Alfred is so clever he'll be able to give him the best advice and get him well out of it," Hester decided optimistically, noting her husband's kindly air towards his young client; and all through breakfast she set herself to aid his efforts.

Her winning air of kindness seemed to work like a charm, as she talked of English days, of Worcestershire fields and lanes and homesteads, finding that they both belonged to the same county. The boy's face lost somewhat of its strained expression; into the blue eyes came a sparkle of brightness, and the smile which reminded Hester of her brother's met hers with an air of guileless confidence.

Nothing pleased her husband better than Hester's simple unconscious power of winning the golden opinions of his clients. It was indeed an asset he valued. His face was radiant with good-humour as he took leave of her to go to the High Court, arranging to return early and drive with her to a polo match on the Island, a spectacle which Hester's liking for horses made always welcome.

As they were driving home that evening Mr. Rayner suddenly said to his wife: "Why, Hester, you have actually never asked for your old friend, Cheveril! Of course I saw him at Puranapore. I declare I'll be malicious enough, and in your presence too, to tell him of your heartless conduct next time we meet. That will take down the august civilian a bit!" he added, with an unpleasant smile which was lost on Hester.

"But, Alfred, I never even knew you had been to Puranapore. Your chit merely said you were going away on pressing business and I somehow took it for granted you were going to where that poor boy came from—Palaveram, isn't it? So you were at Mark's station and saw him?" she said eagerly. "Do tell me all about your visit! Does he like the place? Has he got a nice house, and how does he get on with the Collector? You thought they would be at daggers drawn!"

Hester's variety of questions gave her husband a relieving loophole. He would, if possible, make a selection and only reply to those that suited him. He quickly decided to ignore all mention of his visit to Zynool, and to endeavour to convey the impression that he had seen more of the Assistant-Collector than he actually had, if only she did not press him for details about the English quarter. He told her that he had, of course, given Cheveril a gracious invitation to spend Christmas at Clive's Road, but he had rejected it, preferring the Club. He felt some slight surprise on perceiving that his wife did not evince disappointment at this announcement. Indeed, though Hester would hardly have acknowledged it, and eager as she was to keep in touch with this friend of old days, she felt it was best that his visit to Clive's Road should not be repeated, that Alfred and he should not again come into close quarters. Her husband's nerves were so highly strung and his bitter prejudice against the community to which Mark made no secret of belonging, all made it desirable that there should be little contact between them. Then, too, those little jars during Mark's short stay had left a deep mark on Hester, and brought a flush of vexation to her face every time she recalled them. There was no doubt that Mark must have overheard Alfred's discourtesy to Mr. Morpeth, and also, she feared, his cruel words to herself. Yes, it would be best that he should come for a quiet evening only, and she would try to make it bright, and without any jar for her husband or her friend, she decided with sweet serenity, accepting the limitations of the lot to which, she was feeling every day more conscious, her husband's peculiarities of temperament consigned her.

"Cheveril looks uncommonly well and brisk," remarked Mr. Rayner. "Puranapore must be suiting him. I expect he is already dropping that quixotic notion of proclaiming the dark spot. And upon my word, I was just thinking when I looked at him that no one could detect the touch of the tar brush! He looks quite the pucka service man already. Old Worsley's companionship must be educating! By the way, Hester, I've been thinking we might try to get hold of Worsley when he's here, I rather want to pick up acquaintance with him. I was once introduced to him at the Club, so I should like you to ask him to dinner with Cheveril, and, of course, a regulation number of picked guests. Let's fix the date, and then you can write to Puranapore! Mrs. Glanton will be capturing the pair for Christmas day, if I mistake not; the Brigadier and the Collector are old friends. Let's say the day before Christmas then. Get our lists full and leave a couple of places for the Puranapore contingent, and then you can annex them nearer the time. Yes, that will be best!"

"You always plan things out so methodically, Alfred! I suppose that comes from your legal training. As for me, I prefer to let things arrange themselves," said Hester with a smile, relieved to see that her husband had forgotten the morning's annoyance concerning which she continued to feel penitently that she was the sole cause. She decided that she would still continue to help Mrs. Fellowes in her work, but would not again obtrude these interests on her husband. With tact and tenderness the time might come when he would be disabused of the prejudice which he nursed against all Eurasians; and who would be more fit to break it down than her old friend, who, Charlie used to say, recalled to him Sir Galahad, whose "strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure!" Yes, it would be quite enough joy for her to have one or two good talks with Mark about things old and new, for they would have many mutual experiences to exchange in this their first season in the Eastern land.

The pink haze of the Indian sunset had faded as they drove along the leafy roads. A glorious yellow moon was rising and a soft breeze from the sea rustled among the branching palms overhead. On Hester and her husband fell the peace of the twilight as they sat hand in hand, drinking in the serenity of the scene while the landau bowled along on its easy springs.

The coachman had been told to drive at a slow pace, and just as the carriage was turning into Clive's Road, Hester's attention was attracted by an old woman who was seated on the stump of a tree by the roadside. On catching sight of the carriage, she sprang up quickly, her wrinkled face lit up by a pair of dark piercing eyes.

"Alfred, I'm sure that woman wants to speak to us," said Hester. "She is one of your clients, perhaps."

There was silence for a moment. Mr. Rayner had hurriedly withdrawn his hand from his wife's and seemed pondering.

"Yes, you're right, Hester! That woman is one of my clients. I'd better see what the creature wants, though its past business hours."

"Poor soul, perhaps she expected to find you at the High Court. It's late for her to have travelled so far out. It's good of you, Alfred, to have pity on her old legs," said Hester, as her husband ordered the landau to pull up. He got out hurriedly without another word and went back to where the old woman stood with statuesque pose.

"How kind-hearted Alfred is to be sure!" thought his wife. "Many a young barrister wouldn't have allowed himself to be bothered like this after hours."

"Just drive on, Hester," Rayner called back. "I can walk home, it's just a step!"

She expostulated, saying she would wait.

"Not at all! The walk will do me good. You'll have time to have a little rest before dressing for dinner. Drive on," he called to the coachman, and advanced to meet the waiting woman, whom he accosted with an angry frown. "Now, Mrs. Baltus, what game is this you're up to, dogging my footsteps so that I can't have peace to drive home of an evening with my wife?"

"Your wife, forsooth! 'Tis my girl that should have been thatt if you weren't the false snake you be," retorted the woman, the moonlight revealing her wrinkled face, distorted by passion.

"Look here, Mrs. Baltus, I'm not going to stand any more of your vile accusations. Let me tell you, you have not an atom of proof that I ever meant to marry your daughter. And what's more, I've been a fool ever to let you see the colour of my money; and, my word, you've seen the last of my charity, for that's what it's been pure and simple! I'll stand no blackmailing from you or anybody else," said Mr. Rayner in a bullying tone, as he folded his arms with a resolute air.

"No proof, do you say, Alfred Rayner?" cried the woman shrilly. "We'll see about that! There are more la'yers in Madras besides you! Didn't you come billin' and cooin' with my poor girl many an evening, and was glad to eat my prawn curry, and——"

"Oh, that prawn curry! Shall I never hear the end of it? Anyhow I've paid for it fifty times over! Did you ever for a moment dream I would wed a half-caste like your daughter? And again I ask you how you dare come crawling to my compound? Why are you here to-night?"

"I'll just tell you why! In another five minutes I mean to be in your verandah, and may be further in, a-talkin' to your fine English missus and tellin' her

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what sort o' a blackguard she's gotten for a husband," said Mrs. Baltus, with a defiant air.

"So it's spite and revenge that's brought you tramping all the way from Vepery ? "

"Well, that's my girl's side of it, and no wonder. But look here, young man, I'll make a bargain with you. I'll defer my visit to-night; and if you'll give me a few rupees, I'll crawl away and not disturb your fine lady. Leila and me's stonybroke—it's as true as I stand here ! "

"Well," returned Mr. Rayner briskly, putting his hand in his pocket. "I'll make a bargain with you too. You've got to promise two things before I give you one pie. First, that you will never set foot in Clive's Road on any pretext; second, that Leila does not set foot in the conventicle for girls my wife patronises in Vepery."

"Ha, ha ! Well named, 'a conventicle' indeed ! I'll undertake for my girl, she'll not darken that door again. Why, the poor sweet girl only took a peep to get a sight of your fine English missus. No harm in that, Alfred ! " said the woman in an ingratiating tone.

"Well, what's past is past ! Do you agree then that you cease to annoy me in any way ? If you do, I'll send my horse-keeper to turn you out. Mind what I say ! You haven't any legal claim on me—not for a single pie, but I'll open my purse this time because you're down in your luck. Here's a ten-rupee note, and see you stick to your bargain."

"Certainlee," snapped the woman, as her long brown fingers closed on the note, and turning she hobbled away.

"Well, that's over for this time," muttered Mr. Rayner, "but if I hadn't stopped the creature she would have forced her way into the verandah in no time, then there would have been misery to pay; and just as I was trying to throw off all my worries too, and Hester and I were sitting in the landau like two doves in this glorious moonlight."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THERE is no doubt that one of the minor pleasures of the hot Indian hours for the mem-sahib is a morning spent in a cool corner of the verandah while the hawker unfastens his bales of goods and displays his fascinating wares; and that pleasure is enhanced when shared by the companionship of a sympathetic friend of the feminine gender, or even one of the masculine if he is of the right sort.

Hester had invited Mrs. Fellowes to share the pleasant responsibility of choosing the Christmas presents for home, and she considered herself fortunate in securing her busy friend. A happy, wholesome-minded woman in all things, Mrs. Fellowes admitted that she enjoyed the display of the beautiful wares, and even entered into the spirit of the oriental chaffering which made part of the stock-in-trade of those Eastern pedlars.

It was Rayner Dorai himself who had given orders to his butler to fetch the important functionaries. He had been commanded to summon Yacoob, a little old Mussulman who had more than once presented himself with appealing eyes to inquire whether the mem-sahib would permit him to show his wares—"no buying, seeing only!"

Hester had succumbed once to the temptation, and had bought a trifle; but since that occasion she had resisted Yacoob's appeals, promising that when she required such things she would not fail to buy from him. Veeraswamy had therefore been duly dispatched to Triplicane, the Mussulman quarter, where he said he knew Yacoob dwelt. On the way, however, he happened to encounter Ismail, another hawker, accompanied by a couple of coolies carrying his bales, which betokened him rather a superior gentleman of the trade. Here was an opportunity which Veeraswamy could not resist. Announcing to the Mussulman that he had been commissioned by Rayner Dorai to fetch a hawker, he intimated to Ismail that in return for a little *backsheesh* he might be the fortunate man.

The hawker was a muscular-looking, sleek, well-fed man of pale olive complexion and cheeks, which showed ruddy under the brown skin. From bushy over-hanging eyebrows peered out a pair of bold, cunning eyes, and his square chin was adorned by a dense black beard which he was wagging now in gratified approval as he selected a four-anna piece from his money-bag and held it out to the Hindu.

"Son of a pig, wouldst thou insult me with only that ?" flashed Veeraswamy. "I go on to Triplicane to look for another."

"Halt, pariah dog, dost thou know that not one pie need touch thy greedy palm ? I go to the Rayner compound, I display my treasures, mem-sahib buys," returned Ismail, spreading out his hands dramatically.

"For one rupee only will I sell my honour," replied Veeraswamy, raising his first finger.

"Wallah, one rupee ? 'Twill need too much buying by the mem-sahib to recoup that ! Here then, I give eight annas, greedy one !"

"Not one pie less than one rupee," said the butler, setting his head on one side, and planting himself on the path that led to Clive's Road.

"Take then, thou pariah dog, and a bright new coin too," said Ismail, opening his palm to part with the rupee which he had ready, knowing from the first that it would be exacted as the butler's commission.

"You will find the mem-sahib in the verandah, also mem-sahib Fellowes. They sit with pot full of gold awaiting Ismail's coming," announced Veeraswamy with a grin, as he prepared to push on his way to Triplicane.

"Where, son of a pig, where off to now? Dost thou not return with me to the mem-sahibs?" cried Ismail, with a scowl as he watched him.

"I come, I follow quickly! I go only to get some ghee for my curry from the village near by."

Shaking his head, Ismail already debited his rupee as a bad debt, and went on his way along the red laterite road followed by the patient coolies, who ploughed their way through the red dust like beasts of burden under their heavy load, with no covering for their brown skin save their loin cloths and big turbans.

Ismail began to doubt whether Veeraswamy's commission was not altogether bogus, but his sleek countenance broke into a huge smile when he reached the verandah, and pushing aside a corner of one of the green chinks he caught sight of the two English ladies, who sat chatting together in the most promising manner.

"Oh, here he comes already! Your boy has been uncommonly smart surely," exclaimed Mrs. Fellowes, looking up from the silk sock she was knitting, one of her joys being to keep the colonel in beautiful socks of her own manufacture.

Ismail was salaaming profoundly, but his smile changed to a scowl as he overheard Hester say:

"Ah, but this is not the dear little Yacoob! My boy surely can't have understood the one I wanted."

Ismail hoped devoutly that Veeraswamy would continue to misunderstand. "I werry fine stock, mem-sahib will see," he said eagerly, pushing into the verandah without waiting for an invitation. Beckoning to his coolies, they trudged up and quickly deposited their burdens on the rattan matting of the verandah, and with low salaams hurried down the wide steps again to dispose themselves under the nearest tree and regale themselves with betel-nut, which never failed to find a lodgment in some fold of their linen cloth.

Ismail, being a man of great astuteness as well as of large experience, at once perceived that the butler's report was correct, and that the mem-sahib was on this occasion an intending customer, and an eager one too. He noted also how her pretty eyes, soft grey blue like a monsoon sky, lighted up when she caught sight of his embroideries which he began deftly to display. How fortunate was his good knowledge of "Englishe," he thought, which enabled him to understand even her asides to the older lady, whom he also hoped to captivate as a customer. The young mem-sahib evidently wanted not one thing but many things.

"Yes, I have one beautee smoke-cap, just suiting one padre sahib!" He produced thereupon the article and sold it for the price he asked. Then his richly embroidered table covers sewed on black cloth were examined, but the hawker's face grew dark as he overheard Mrs. Fellowes remarking:

"We must examine carefully the stuff they are sewn on. They often put the most exquisite work on the joined up tail of a dress coat, or even a bit out of a pair of trousers."

Mrs. Fellowes' first finger thereupon went right through a worn-out patch in a gorgeous table cover.

"Oh, that would never do for mother," said Hester, at once rejecting the handsome embroidery. "She would never forgive the immorality of it, for one thing!"

"Well, my dear, what you must do in future is to order the cloth from home and give it to a faithful man to embroider."

"Ah, here comes my friend, Yacoob!" exclaimed Hester, as there appeared a little, refined-looking old man with delicate features, large well-set eyes, and a sweet sensitive face.

"Oh, yes, I've heard of Yacoob," said Mrs. Fellowes. "I believe he is the most beautiful embroiderer in Madras, and the most honest," she whispered, but not so low that it did not catch the quick ear of Ismail, who looked furious as Yacoob stood smilingly salaaming to the ladies.

Yacoob was far from being a rich man like Ismail, and had carried his own goods unaided, save by a slender boy, his grandson. Veeraswamy had, of course, hurried to Triplicane to summon the good little hawker, whom he found sitting cross-legged in his pandal, sewing exquisite embroidery on the finest of white muslin, surrounded by several generations of his family, the youngest members being dusky babies crawling about the carpet on which he sat ; yet no spot or stain ever reached Yacoob's needlework.

On hearing of the mem-sahib's summons he bundled his sewing into a green silk kerchief which looked none of the cleanest, but which must have been in some occult way warranted not to contaminate Yacoob's precious art.

He looked sad and pathetic as he caught sight of Ismail's jealous frown. It was evident his sensitive nature shrank from the rough rivalry of his class. With feeble fingers he began to untie his parcel of goods when Hester said :

" Come, Yacoob, my heart is set on having one of your beautiful beetle-wing dresses. I want it for my cousin," she added, turning to Mrs. Fellowes, " I think she would like one done on black best."

" Salaams, mem-sahib, but I only have the best shining beetle-wings,"said Ismail, making a cringing progress towards Hester as he held up yards of net embroidered with iridescent beetle-wings.

" Now, let's examine this ! " said Mrs. Fellowes. " Since you want a dress, the net must, at least, be new ! This is lovely work, Ismail, but what about the net ! It isn't black, it's the colour of dusty spider's web ! Let me see one of yours, Yacoob."

The little man brought the required length with a gracious salaam and an assured smile.

" Now, this will do, the net is jet black and strong ! "

"Very well, I'll have this, Yacoob," said Hester. "How much does it cost?"

A very moderate price was named, but at once Ismail came forward saying harshly: "Too much charging, mem-sahib. I giving for seven rupees less. A very best one too—not one I shewing first."

He turned to rummage in his bales, but Hester was not to be moved. Little Yacoob's beetle-wing dress was laid aside to be admired for many a day across the sea.

Fortunately for Ismail he was able to display some wares which Yacoob's slender capital did not admit of, so that he was not without profit in the morning's dealings; but being of a surly, jealous disposition he owed a fresh grudge against Yacoob that he should have been preferred, and a still more bitter grudge against the butler for his share in the transaction.

At length all the purchases were completed. Yacoob was departing with a lightened bale of goods and a full purse, his old face wearing an air of gracious courtesy, when a corner of the rattan blinds was lightly pushed aside and a girl's face appeared.

"Why, that is the girl I was telling you about, Mrs. Fellowes!" exclaimed Hester. "How good you happen to be here! Perhaps she has thought better of it and come to enrol."

Hester rose from her chair, and hurried across the verandah. The blind had been dropped, but when she raised it, there stood the girl, spell-bound, it seemed, staring intently with parched lips and dilating eyes on the young wife who looked at her with a friendly smile.

"How do you do! I recollect you quite well. You looked in at our meeting one afternoon. I'm glad you've come this morning, you'll see Mrs. Fellowes herself. Do come in!"

The girl hesitated, then curiosity or some other feeling seemed to prevail, and she drew herself up with a repressed air and silently followed the mistress of the house.

" This is Leila Baltus I told you of," said Hester, standing in front of Mrs. Fellowes' chair.

Something seemed to irritate the girl, who said in a bellicose tone : " Ho, so you've got hold of my name, have you ? Well, I'm glad and I'm sorry," she muttered, scanning Hester eagerly, while Mrs. Fellowes eyes rested on her with a meditative glance.

" Oh, you needn't be eyeing me up and down like that," retorted the girl, with an insolent toss of her head. " You'll not catch me sitting on a bench like a chit of a schoolgirl after I've seen life. La, you could hardly expect Leila Baltus to do thatt at this time o' day," she added, with a laugh.

Before she had finished speaking Mrs. Fellowes' eyes were upon her knitting again. Her face looked grave and troubled, but she made no remark.

" But won't you just come once and see what a happy afternoon we have ? " asked Hester in a coaxing tone. " We have some beautiful patterns for clothes, and there is reading aloud and singing," she urged, looking into the bitter face with a winning smile of which her friend, glancing up suddenly, seemed to catch the pathos, as a ray of sunlight from aslant the green blinds lit up the fair young face till it looked as an angel's might. Mrs. Fellowes sighed deeply as she bent over her work again, and did not let her eyes rest further on the stranger.

" Well, I'll not come to your meeting ! That's flat ! But no offence meant. I say, does your husband happen to be at home ? " asked the girl sharply. " It's with La'yer Rayner I've got a bit of business."

" Oh, you want to see my husband on business, do you ? You are one of his clients, perhaps ? He is at the High Court, but you might see him by appointment," said Hester, thinking after all she had made a stupid mistake.

" Oh, as to thatt, I'm not particular anxious to face those business dens. Maybe I'll get a peep of him yet, and a word of him too, nearer home, some day. I'll be stepping now. Sorry I can't oblige you about the class," she added, glancing down with malicious air at Mrs. Fellowes, who still sat with her eyes fixed on her knitting. "Maybe you'll be good enough to mention to Mister Rayner as how Leila Baltus called—his client—is that how you name it ?" she asked, with a titter; then, drawing her tawdry black lace scarf round her handsome shoulders, she walked away and disappeared into the bright sunshine beyond the green blinds.

"Well, we haven't made much of Miss Leila Baltus after all," said Hester, throwing herself into her chair. "I suppose you came to the conclusion at once that she wasn't a hopeful 'Friendly ?'"

"I did, my dear," returned Mrs. Fellowes gravely. "I don't want to discourage you, but I fear for the present at least we can't reach that bit of stony ground. And if you will not think me hard, I should advise you to leave Miss Leila Baltus severely alone."

Mrs. Fellowes was of the type that "hopeth all things"; her advice, therefore, took Hester by surprise, but her great respect for her opinion on all matters made her wish to discuss the subject further. Just then, however, the conversation was interrupted by the gong sounding for tiffin.

As Mrs. Fellowes passed through the drawing-room on her young hostess's arm there was a shadow on her face which had not left it since the appearance of the mysterious visitor, and which returned to it in after hours when she recalled the unpleasant incident.

Meanwhile Leila Baltus with rapid steps had left the Rayners' compound, and stood glancing up and down the road as if in search of someone. Presently she perceived an elderly woman lurking behind a jungly hedge, and joined her, saying bitterly :

"No manner of use—only wasted our shoe leather! You were quite out of your reckoning, mother, in thinkin' we'd catch him at tiffin time. Alf ain't so easy caught, worse luck !"

"So you haven't seen him ?" said the older woman, with a dispirited sigh. "Why, but this was to be your trump card, you boasted—and it's failed!"

"Not quite, for I've been inside the verandah, and seen her in her own house that should have been mine. I could have put a knife into her, for all that she's a pleasant, soft-spoken lady. Somehow I didn't get my tongue proper loosed on her! But I hate her, yes, I hate her, all the more that she's so fair and prettee"; and the girl raised a clenched fist and shook it in the air.

"Ay, you mind, Leila, how he twitted me with our being black half-castes? But I'll be even with Alfred Rayner yet!" cried the old woman shrilly, swaying from very weariness as she tramped along the hot, dusty road.

"Come, mother, I'll tell you what she was dressed in. It'll shorten the road," said the girl, with an effort to be cheerful, as she cast a pitying glance at the stumbling figure by her side, and drew her mother's arm into hers.

"Well, her dress wasn't silk, it wasn't even fine sprigged muslin, but just cotton, think of that—no better than bazaar dungerie, or your own morning wrapper. But, oh, it was such a beautee! It was pale blue, and it had lovelee gathers on the bodice, smockin', I think they call it. You see it in the fashion plates. It's my belief I could imitate thatt if only money weren't so hard to get," she wound up with a sigh.

"Trust me, Leila, I'll have another and a bigger note out of him in no time. I've taken the measure of him. He's a coward as well as a villain. I declare he's no better than if he was a native. Did you ever notice his hands? There's no strength there—just slim, long fingers like a half-caste's. Yes, I'll be even with that young man yet," cried the woman, with undaunted spirit as she trudged along, weary and footsore.

The chairs and tables of the verandah at Clive's

Road were still strewn with Hester's purchases when her husband returned from the High Court. She was delighted with his sympathetic attitude and with his approval of her choice of gifts. He was eager also to help her in affixing cards with the names, so dear and familiar to her, and loving Christmas wishes on each. His zeal even reached the unwonted climax of rummaging in a godown for tin-lined cases and helping her to pack her offerings. At length all was finished, and they sank on their lounging chairs with a sense of a well-earned rest.

Never had Hester felt in closer unison with her husband or more radiantly happy. The deal packing case lay near, requiring only the coming of the "tiniesmith" in the morning to solder its lining down. Every now and then she cast loving looks upon it, seeing visions of what pleasure its arrival would bring to the beloved inmates of the Rectory, while her husband gaily congratulated her in having made a hundred rupees buy so many pretty things. "And from Ismail too, a hard-fisted rascal, follows the profession of a *soukar*, a money-lender—as well as that of a hawker—swindled a client of mine lately."

"Oh, that reminds me, Alfred. There was a client of yours in search of you here just before tiffin——"

"A client? Young Hyde from Palaveram?"

"Oh, no, I wish it had been, poor fellow! No, it was a haughty, inscrutable-looking young woman, to whom Mrs. Fellowes seemed to take an instinctive dislike, and she's generally so charitable. Poor thing, I thought at first she was coming to enrol for our 'Friendly.' But I think I once asked you before if you knew her by name," said Hester, suddenly pausing. She certainly had not connected Alfred's outburst of temper with the name of this girl, but she felt she ought to have remembered that the very mention of any Eurasian seemed to make her husband angry.

"Dear me, Hester, how you do meander on!" said Mr. Rayner irritably. "What was the girl's name?"

"Leila Baltus," answered Hester meekly. "She said you would know who she was—in fact, it was you she came to see."

"Never heard of such a person in my life! She's no client of mine, be assured of that—more likely a lying half-caste beggar!"

Hester saw that her husband looked blanched as if by uncontrollable anger—or was it agitation? He was silent for a moment, then he asked, evidently with an effort to assume an unconcerned tone: "Did the creature say what she wanted? Did she give any reason for her visit?"

"Not in the least! I think she said she would see you some other time. She certainly called herself a client," replied Hester dejectedly, for it was borne in upon her that her husband's sudden source of annoyance came after all from the mention of this girl's name. He did know Leila Baltus, though he denied all knowledge of her! It was a staggering revelation to the young wife. She turned her clear eyes on her husband's averted profile and longed to say: "This secrecy, this prevarication is much harder to bear than anything you may have to tell me!"

On his side, Alfred Rayner was dwelling, with as much honest regret as his nature was capable of, on his having been unfortunate enough to have been betrayed into useless lying concerning a matter which he might have dealt with more effectually by acknowledging his former flirtation—now hateful to him—with this Eurasian girl. To have assured Hester, as he had assured the old woman on the road, that her daughter had no possible hold on him, but was simply blackmailing. But what would the straightforward Hester think if he laid bare the whole matter now when she recalled that not five minutes ago he had disavowed all knowledge of the girl? No, the remedy would be worse than the trouble, he decided peevishly. He rose from his chair complaining of a headache, and went sullenly to bed.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHRISTMAS gaieties were now in the air. The pleasant life-long associations which cluster round that season for Anglo-Indians seem to urge them to almost feverish anxiety to celebrate it with increased zeal in their exile. The whole community in fact catches the contagion. The natives, both civil and sepoy, look forward to " Kismas " as a time of gifts and *tomashas*; while the Eurasian community vie with each other in imitating its time-honoured rites.

To Hester Rayner its approach brought more than a suspicion of homesickness. She remembered sadly that the glad old greetings would sound for other ears than hers in the dear home far away, while to her husband, the chief preoccupation seemed the success of the impending dinner-party on which he had set his heart. The invitations had been duly issued by Hester, and to his satisfaction the hoped-for guests had all responded, two covers being reserved for the Collector of Puranapore and his Assistant.

The dinner had been arranged on an even more lavish scale than any of their former entertainments. The rarest flowers procurable were ordered. The menu was to be purveyed by D'Angelis, a clever Italian chef, who sent forth the daintiest of entrées and savouries, and the most delectable of ice-puddings.

" All must be of the most elegant and select," said Mr. Rayner, looking up from his lists before him. " I want old Worsley to see what a first-rate dinner 'La'yer Rayner' can give. I've ordered cases of the best hock and champagne to please his fastidious palate. I hear his boy is an excellent caterer, and no doubt Worsley is a *bonne fourchette*."

But disappointment came in the shape of a note from Mark Cheveril to Hester, to tell her that he and his chief were engaged for Christmas Eve. She read Mark's letter aloud in faltering tones, knowing the chagrin it would bring to her husband, who said bitterly:

"A very lukewarm friend, Hester! He might easily have arranged to come to us if he had cared to. Yet what friendship he professed for you and the whole Bellairs family! But you see it is just in such selfish moves that his half-caste blood comes out!"

Hester did not like her husband throwing the blame on Mark, yet she could not help feeling that her old friend might have remembered how much it would mean to her to see a home face among the new acquaintances who were to gather round their board. Mr. Rayner seemed anxious to ignore the disappointment.

"I can easily provide substitutes," he remarked airily, "who will be proud to sit at my table." But Hester felt that this artificial occasion would only remind her sorrowfully of the happy gatherings of Pinkthorpe days; the excitement of decorating the village church, the frosty sunsets, the joys of holly and misletoe, and the festive air which seemed to pervade everything.

Christmas Eve came round. She had already dressed for dinner, wearing, at her husband's request, her wedding dress, with beautiful, white camellias at her waist and on her fair wavy hair.

"Oh, ma'm, how booful you looking," said her ayah, with many ejaculations of admiration; and she called Rosie to have a peep at the beautiful Dosani.

Hester had just fastened her gold cross with its tiny chain on her neck when her husband entered the room.

"How fortunate I've remembered, Hester! I've just excavated your diamonds from my safe. I believe you wanted to give them a premature burial there! Not so shall you treat my loving gifts, my love! Off with that trumpery cross and let me see my gems sparkling on your beautiful neck!"

Hester tried hard to conceal the disappointment she felt at having to wear the ostentatious jewel, but she saw it was inevitable, though the ayah, on the pretext of arranging the folds of her dress, whispered to her: "Missus wear cross—that plentee luckee jewel!"

The change, however, was effected, though Hester averted her eyes from the mirror that she might not behold herself in the resplendent gem, though she felt somewhat rewarded for her self-sacrifice by her husband's gratification.

The long elaborate dinner seemed to drag endlessly, and it was apparent to Hester that one or two of the guests looked bored. After the ladies returned to the drawing-room, the "rankest" lady, whom the host had taken into dinner, said to her with a pronounced yawn:

"I didn't like to ask your husband—but my dear Mrs. Rayner, what became of the Collector of Puranapore? I understood he was to be your guest this evening?"

"Oh, that was only a peradventure, Mrs. Grace. Mr. Worsley only arrived in Madras to-day, and was engaged for this evening."

"Then he declined your invitation?" asked Mrs. Grace sharply. "And his Assistant, did he also decline? I thought we were to have the pleasure of meeting both. In fact, Mr. Rayner told my husband so some time ago." She was about to add: "And but for that expectation we would have also declined the invitation." But even the Mrs. Graces of Anglo-Indian society have bounds which they cannot pass.

Observing the flush that rose to her hostess's face, she changed the topic, though on her drive home she did not fail to remark to her husband:

"That favourite of yours has shifty eyes, my dear. I don't like the man, and he lured us to that dull party on false pretences. I discovered that neither Mr. Worsley nor his Sub. had accepted the invitation to the party—found it out from Mrs. Rayner. Sorry for her, poor thing! She seems a lady, didn't even try to explain away her husband's snaring of us, though I saw she felt it. And what an extravagant dinner! Why, those flowers must have cost a fortune! And the things all came from D'Angelis, I recognised his dishes."

"First-rate wine," remarked Mr. Grace in a plethoric voice. "Wish I could afford such good stuff! Rayner must be a rich man. That feast anyhow must have cost a mint of money!"

"And did you see his wife's diamonds too? A new acquisition evidently—never saw them before. A little gold cross was all the girl ever wore. I expect he was bullied into that expensive gift, or perhaps she got it from some admirer."

"What cats you women are! Don't believe that girl could bully anybody though she tried. To my mind she's the most ladylike girl about just now. I felt sorry for her to-night. Her face had a sad look when she wasn't trying to talk to that dull fellow who took her in. I don't know where Rayner picked him up. I suppose he was asked to fill the Collector's place."

The conjugal remarks as the relays of carriages swept out of the Rayner's compound bore a strong resemblance to each other. The host and hostess were also keenly aware that the elaborate dinner-party had been less successful than any of its predecessors, though that knowledge affected them differently.

"I close my cheque book to dinners of that sort in future," said Mr. Rayner with a snarl, as he flung himself on a lounging chair in the verandah and betook himself to a cheroot. "Ungrateful pack, one and all! They only came to eat D'Angelis' excellent *pâté de foie gras* and toss down my magnums of the best champagne. Shan't get the chance again!"

Hester expressed herself by no means sorry to hear her husband register this vow, and added musingly:

"Small dinner parties can be delightful. You remember when we dined at Mrs. Fellowes' there were only eight of us in all. And how bright the talk was, and how prettily Mrs. Fellowes had decorated the table with those simple tendrils from her own hedge, and how beautifully those silver tankards shone—the Colonel's sporting trophies, his own and his father's, who had been in the same regiment. He told me so many interesting things about the Native Infantry that evening. And then those pretty old English ballads Mrs. Fellowes sang were delightful."

"Well, Hester, I'm sure you might have given us a song to-night! It would have made a variety. Why didn't you?"

"Because you said last time we had a dinner-party that nobody was to be asked to sing—that music seemed a disturbing element to the lords of creation over their wine—so I forbore. Or, rather, I should say, it was never suggested. I shouldn't think Mrs. Grace cared for music. But I'll give you a Christmas carol now before we go to bed if you like. It will chase away the gaudy note of our last big dinner-party. Oh, I'm so glad, Alfred, you've made up your mind not to have any more of those 'meetings of debtors and creditors,' as someone calls them," said Hester more cheerfully, as she went to the piano and pondered which of the old carols she would choose for this Christmas Eve, deciding that nothing could be more welcome than the hymn which calls us to "lay aside our crushing load and hear the angels sing."

Hester lingered for some time at the piano singing old favourites. When she rose from it, the little cloud which had been resting on her seemed overlaid by the spirit of peace. She felt vexed as she drew near her husband's chair that there was no response to the gladsome words. He sat staring gloomily into the darkness, and she did not venture to disturb him.

Next morning Hester was astir even earlier than usual. She had prepared little Christmas presents for each of the numerous servants, and enjoyed their evident gratified reception of them. Her ayah and Rosie were soon resplendent in her gift of new sarees. Even the *malis* were not forgotten, and deposited their big red watering-chattees in front of the house while they made salaams to the Dosani in return for their new turbans.

Mr. Rayner had been employing his early Christmas morning by making a big bonfire of old papers outside the verandah of his writing-room, coaxing the flames in the still air with a palm leaf. While so engaged a telegram was handed to him.

"Horrid news from Palaveram, Hester," he called to his wife. "Young Hyde shot himself last night after mess—just as I was trying to extricate him from his troubles. They've asked me to go out to arrange matters. Great nuisance! I meant to spend the day peacefully lounging about the verandah and smoking cheroots."

"Young Hyde dead by his own hand! Oh, poor boy, how dreadfully sad!" exclaimed Hester in horror, mourning another "rashly importunate gone to his death" in that long sad procession of broken lives.

Mr. Rayner left after breakfast, and Hester felt glad she could respond to the chimes of the Cathedral, which were ringing for worship on this Christmas morning. They seemed to have a special note for her saddened heart, telling of the wideness of God's mercy—like that fair, illimitable ocean in its shining peace which swept round these shores, and of which she could catch glimpses as she took her solitary drive to church to find strength and hope in the all-embracing symbols of Infinite Love.

She returned home soothed and helped by the familiar service which seemed to forge a link between the little village church at home and the noble Cathedral beneath the waving Indian palms.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. RAYNER had promised to return from Palaveram in time for dinner, but long, solitary hours till dusk still stretched before Hester on her return from morning service. She had not as yet yielded to the habit of taking a siesta, though she was assured that when the hot weather came she would find the need of it imperative. She sought instead companionship in her piano, rehearsing some of her old favourites, and then turned to a prettily bound volume of hymns set to music, which had been a wedding present from a Wesleyan friend. She tried over some of the airs, and coming on one which attracted her began to sing the words. Her sweet voice, which was so much missed in the ivy-mantled village church, vibrated melodiously through the verandah. So absorbed was she in her solace of song that she did not hear the arrival of a carriage on the gravel-sweep. Its occupant indeed stood at her elbow, silently looking down at her as her fingers strayed along the keys, before she was aware of his presence.

"Mark Cheveril!" she exclaimed at length, looking up with joy in her face. "This is a happy surprise!"

"It is so for me, anyhow. I wanted to have come earlier in the day to wish you a merry Christmas, but the Collector seemed dull, and I couldn't leave him. But better late than never. And to be greeted by the sound of your voice was good," he added, glancing at the slender, girlish figure on the music stool on which she had wheeled round to greet him in her surprise at his presence. "This will make a delightful paragraph in the letter to your mother I mean to date

'Christmas Day, Madras.' But I must really tell you before we pass on to other things a strange coincidence about this very hymn you were singing. You remember Mr. Morpeth whom we met at Mrs. Fellowes' that morning? I felt so drawn to him that I did what I don't think I ever confessed to you—I sought him out. When I stepped into his verandah I found him alone, and singing that very hymn." Mark hummed some of the lines—

"Light of those whose dreary dwellings
Borders on the shades of death."

"It has haunted me ever since. I must tell him of this coincidence. I have been corresponding with him, and mean to keep up the acquaintance. I heard from him that you had found your way to Vepery too, Hester, and are doing wonders there."

"Ah, that reminds me, Mark! A little bird told me only yesterday that you were the kind donor of our lovely piano for the girls' club. You can't think what a boon it is."

"I hope it's a decent one. I fear pianos are rather a lottery out here, and it would have lost a whole season to have ordered one from home."

"It has a beautiful tone, Mrs. Fellowes just loves it. It was a good thought of yours, Mark. How pleased mother will be when she hears you were the giver of the piano I told her about! I'm so glad Mrs. Fellowes wormed the secret out of Mr. Morpeth. Do you know I've never seen him since you left? He seems to elude me still—perhaps it's no wonder." Hester lowered her eyes, for she suddenly recalled her husband's reception of him, which she feared Mark must have overheard. "But notwithstanding," she said with a smile, "I don't think he does bear me a grudge, for Mrs. Fellowes told me he seemed pleased to hear I wished to go to see him with her. She says his house is full of interesting things."

"It is," returned Mark cordially. "But the man—

his personality, his talk—is the most interesting of all. Truly fate has been very good to me since I came to the East. In my first week I met two of the best men I've ever known, David Morpeth and Felix Worsley. To be sure, they are very unlike—as far as the poles asunder in almost everything. The one seemed to me a wise, patient saint, while the Collector is the most impatient of men. I fear, too, he would say I was defaming the name if I was to dub him 'a saint,' yet there is about him the beauty of real dominant goodness. For instance, people say he is proud and all that—well, I find him full of the most winning humility."

"Why, I've always pictured Mr. Worsley as a most terrifying person from the stray remarks I've heard about him. Surely you idealise him, Mark, and see in him the reflection of your own good self. I think that's how Charlie would interpret your feelings."

"Ah, I see I shan't win you over to my hero till you see him."

"With your eyes ?" said Hester, with an arch smile.

"No, with your own, if I mistake not ! I only wish I could bring about a meeting. But I confess my hero is somewhat incorrigible. Nothing will induce him to face a fashionable dinner-party, and that reminds me, Hester, I must tell you how sorry I was not to be with you last night and not to bring the Collector—but he simply wouldn't hear of going to a dinner-party."

"Yes, Alfred was disappointed. He said he was once introduced to Mr. Worsley, and seemed to set his heart on having him as his guest," said Hester simply.

Mark felt a sharp twinge of self-reproach, for had not the truth been that the Collector had rejected the invitation stormily, saying he "declined to dine with Zynool's partner" ? As Mark recalled it he feared that some of the borrowed stigma might also attach itself to this sweet friend in Mr. Worsley's mind—

until they met, at least. When that hour struck, he felt confident that all would be well. As he glanced at Hester, he perceived that there was a subtle change in his old comrade. Her beauty had strengthened and deepened. There was a new air of tender grace in all her movements; but she was paler and thinner, the plump, girlish contour had vanished. The features, more delicately pencilled than heretofore, seemed written over with a bit of life-history not free from fret and jar, even blurred by patient tears. How could it be otherwise, he asked himself, with this high-souled girl exposed to the daily companionship of a nature so vain, so shallow, and he feared, so false, as he was reluctantly discovering Alfred Rayner to be? He recalled with fresh anxiety his shifty air when he had met him at Puranapore during his mysterious visit to the unprincipled Zynool. But happy chance had thrown Hester and him together on this Day of Glad Tidings. He must do all in his power to bring some pure, healthful pleasure into those few days on which he would be near her.

"By the way," he said, as he rose to take a cup of tea from Hester's hand, "I mustn't forget that one of the chief objects of my call to-day is to ask you to ride with me one morning. Some of the roads here are capital."

"Oh, that would be delightful—just like old times," said Hester brightening. "I haven't ridden since I came here. Alfred doesn't like riding, though he is so devoted to driving. Even when he was at the Rectory after our engagement, which you know was very short, he wouldn't go out with Charlie and me. Charlie thought he was really timid, and told me not to urge him. He won't mind my riding—at least I don't think so," she added, a shadow crossing her face not unnoticed by her visitor. "But he'll be here presently, and we'll ask him. You'll stay to dinner and see him, won't you?"

"With pleasure. I'm quite free this evening and we'll arrange this one ride anyhow. I've seen a perfect horse for you at Wallers'. I shall bring it round to-morrow morning. What do you say to going to St. Thomas's Mount? It's a place I've a fancy to explore. Have you been there?"

"No, I've really seen very few places round about—beyond the range of the wide compounds. I think your touring must be delightful. But you haven't told me anything of Puranapore yet except about the Collector, and I didn't get much from Alfred even after he had visited you."

Mark was silent. Rayner then had given his wife the impression that he had been at the English station while at Puranapore, and had, no doubt, concealed the fact that he was visiting Zynool. The discovery was disturbing, and he wondered if it would be wise to enlighten Hester there and then. He felt, however, that he could not bear to bring a deeper shadow to the sweet face, and proceeded instead to give some annals of the station-life.

"Well, to begin with the ladies. There's Mrs. Samptor, wife of the Superintendent of the District Jail, a big giant of a man, and a capital fellow. She is a little country-bred person who had never been to England and has a perfect horror of Eurasians."

Hester's eyes opened wider. She was about to exclaim: "Just like Alfred!" But that topic had cut too deep for her to touch it lightly.

"You wonder perhaps how she tolerates me," said Mark with a smile, as if divining her thoughts. "Well, as it happens, we are very good friends. Her mental process regarding the matter is peculiar, I allow, but it seems to her convincing, as she is a lady who prides herself on knowing everything about everybody. She volunteers to prove from my hands, my nails, and from my toes, I expect, if she were allowed to inspect them, from every feature of my face in fact, that I do not belong to the race she detests."

"And does the Collector like this little lady?"

"He does, I think. She amuses him. I sometimes accuse him of even encouraging her gossip. In that connection I once reminded him of the old proverb: 'One man may steal a horse, another may not look over the stable door,' as a case in point. The Collector's denunciations against gossip are most scathing, for instance, where Mrs. Goldring, the Judge's wife, is in question. She is a pompous, snobbish woman, and the Collector thinks that she sits on her little husband, the Judge, of whom he is very fond. Nor can he forgive her for her treatment of her weird-looking daughter Jane. The poor girl hates station life, and wants to go home and do governessing with some beloved aunts who keep a school. Then we have a Civil Surgeon and his wife, Dr. and Mrs. Campbell, delightful Scotch people."

"I wonder Alfred did not tell me about all these people. He must have met them when he was at Puranapore," said Hester, with a thoughtful air which Mark noticed, and he at once led the conversation into other channels.

Hester narrated to him the errand which had obliged her husband to go to Palaveram on this Christmas day, and they talked with sobered hearts of the sadness of it all; of the great entanglement in the meshes of which poor young Hyde had fallen a victim; and of the ever haunting mystery of life where evil triumphs in lives which seem inclined to good rather than to evil.

Shortly before the dinner-hour a telegram arrived from Palaveram to say that Mr. Rayner to his great regret would be unable to eat his Christmas dinner with his wife. But so congenially did the talk glide on between these two old friends, the young hostess decided, as she sat at dinner, that, after all, two might be an even more ideal number than eight for the complete enjoyment of the dinner-table.

When Mark rose to go, he was rejoiced to see Hester looking more like her old self than she had done since they had met in their new surroundings. She seemed to hold to her decision that there was no obstacle to the morning ride which he had suggested, saying as they parted :

"Alfred has so often reproached me for not going further afield in my drives, I'm sure he will be pleased to hear I've been adventurous enough to scale St. Thomas's Mount. You can't think what a joy an hour on horseback will be to me! It's a delightful suggestion, Mark, and I thank you for it," she said, with happy, grateful eyes, as she bade him good-night.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE Eastern sky was still dim silvery grey when Mark Cheveril dismounted from his fine chestnut cob in front of the Rayner's verandah. Handing his horse to the syce, he turned to the other, a beautiful black Arab which he had secured for Hester, and whose girths and bridles he began carefully to inspect for the second time.

Presently Hester appeared on the verandah steps with a smiling face, wearing her riding habit for the first time since she left Worcestershire. Greeting Mark with a joyous mien, she renewed her thanks for the pleasure in prospect, sprang lightly to her saddle, and the cavalcade started; their respective syces following on foot, brandishing their long brush-like switches used to protect the horses from flies when a halt was made.

The riders trotted slowly along the wide Mount Road where at this early hour there was little traffic, only a few natives stepping about. Crossing the Adyar by the noble Marmalong Bridge, residences and their spreading compounds were soon left behind. Their route skirted the broad, winding reaches of the river, its banks fringed by peepul and casuarina trees, and here and there topes of cocoanut palms raised their graceful heads. The air was still cool and the early morning scents fragrant. Even the fumes of burnt charcoal curling upwards from the Thousand Lights Bazaar were pleasing to the riders, recalling the odour of furze fires on home moorlands.

Happy as were these two old friends to be together in such pleasant circumstances, their talk was as yet limited to spasmodic comments on the sights and sounds new to both. Mark was delighted to note the bright healthful glow on Hester's cheek, and resolved that each of the remaining mornings of his visit to Madras should be devoted to a morning ride together. He felt confident that her husband would approve when he saw how well-trained and reliable the Arab proved, and heard how greatly Hester was captivated by its paces.

They had now reached the ancient historical spot which was to be the goal of their morning's expedition. To eyes used to hills of home, St. Thomas's Mount seemed a very low eminence, though from the flat plain stretching all round it appeared to stand out like a unique personality. Possibly it was this feature which had caused it, centuries ago, to be singled out by devout pilgrims as a shrine. Fact and fiction had woven many legends round its steep grassy slopes, the most outstanding being the alleged visit of the Apostle whose name it bore. The Portuguese, the earliest European adventurers in the East, had established a mission there. Their ancient chapel which crowns the summit dates four centuries back. Instead of the zig-zag path which one expects in hill-climbing, the summit of the Mount is reached by a long, gradual ascent of granite steps which sparkled in the sun as if bestrewn by gems, and called forth the admiration of the riders as they halted at the base of the hill.

There, by Mark's arrangement, fresh syces had been posted from the stables for the return ride. They squatted on the sunny steps, their lips red with chewing betel-nut. They jumped up with salaams to take over charge of the hot steeds and to rub them down, while Mark, with liberal *backsheesh*, dispatched the returning pair of runners for, doubtless, a very leisurely progress townwards.

Hester had already scaled some of the steps of the shining stair when Mark joined her.

"Here we are, Hester, another pair of pilgrims treading the steps that have been climbed for centuries by feet often weary enough, no doubt, not to speak of hearts that ached ! "

" Yes, it feels good to picture it—gives one a feeling of brotherhood, doesn't it ? I wonder if the pilgrims ever crawled on their knees up those many steps as they do on the *Santa Scala* in Rome," said Hester, recalling the sight she had seen last Easter when she went for her first visit to Italy with her father.

As she lightly trod on, her thoughts lingered over Mark's suggestion, till she felt as if she too were one of the long procession of care-encumbered men and women who had come—some with true faith and zeal—to seek the true helper in the little chapel with its sacred symbols, which was once no doubt like an oasis in the desert of surrounding heathenism. Its dedication to the *Expectation of the Blessed Virgin* could still be traced in rude, half-effaced letters over the doorway. The little building was very primitive both within and without. Underneath its rough stone pavement lay many dead.

Presently the visitors came to the most interesting relic within the building—a grey stone slab finely carved, a scroll running round it on which there was a curious inscription, and in the centre a beautiful Persian cross with a dove brooding over it.

" That slab must have proved a bigger effort for some old-time Christian than one of our finest monuments to the modern sculptor," said Mark, after a close inspection of the carving. " The man who carved it must have been a genius. Think of the rough tools he had, and the absence probably of all suggestion from without ! "

" Yes, isn't it rather symbolic too," answered Hester with a sigh. " Don't each of us have to carve our own crosses with rough tools till sometimes our fingers bleed, and our hearts too ? "

" Wouldn't it be a more comforting metaphor to say that the Master Sculptor does that for us—chip by chip—till the work stands out a thing of beauty like that old cross ? "

"But the process hurts, Mark ! Shall we never be finished ? Will our chipping go on to the very end ? " said Hester, with a sudden ring of pain in her voice.

"Yes, I think it must go on till our new beginning," returned Mark quietly. "Then we shall find—and what's better, the Great Maker will find—that no touch of His hand has been in vain, that every blow with the mallet was needed, every scrape with the sharp tool," he added, in a pitying voice, for he had detected that Hester's questioning cry had been wrung from an aching heart.

"Thank you, Mark," she murmured, after a moment's silence. "I shan't forget your parable next time the mallet or the piercing tool tries to improve me, and shall recall this grey stone—so finished, so perfect. Surely loving hands fashioned it, as you say, or it would not have withstood the ravages of centuries to tell its tale to us on this bright morning."

As the two friends wandered on among the grey relics, "praising the chapel sweet with its little porch and its rustic door," Mark was reminded of a description in a well-read page of his favourite poet. In some of its aspects, it so truly described this morning which he was spending with Hester, that he resolved to bring the brown volume in his pocket the next time they rode together and read to her the lovely description of the old chapel and all that followed.

Yes, that "screen" though slight was "sure" ! He would try to prove loyal in all things to this girl, who was evidently finding life very different from the flower-strewn path she had looked forward to when that bright letter reached him in the German Gasthaus, telling him of her engagement. He was glad to think it was still given him to cherish her as a friend. "Friends—lovers that might have been," he murmured. Then, in spite of himself, as they walked silently down the steps together, more of the poet's words vibrated in his heart——

> "Oh the little more and how much it is,
> And the little less, and what worlds away
> And life be the proof of this."

Though Hester did not clothe her thoughts in Browning's pathetic words, they followed much the same trend of feeling. How magnetic was the influence of this high-souled companion, who seemed to bring out of the treasure-house of his mind deep things, new and old. How was it that this friend of Charlie's never seemed so magnetic in the days when they had ridden together in green byways at home? Why was it reserved for her only to find his many-sided value and charm when she was the wife of Alfred Rayner? Ah, how different was the daily companionship which was her portion now, strewn as it was with pin-pricks that hurt, even thorns that bled! Some of these she could only cease to feel, she thought with burning cheek, if she could descend from high ideals, ignore moral standards, and sink to the level of base and sordid thoughts and actions. But Alfred must be helped to better things, she resolved with fresh hope and courage, drawn from this happy morning. She must be more patient, more inventive in throwing him in the way of every good influence, and in this, who could help her better than the comrade who now rode by her side?

She reined her horse to a walk and turned to him, saying in a pleading voice:

"Mark, I have a favour to ask of you! Will you see as much of my husband as you can? Will you try to win his confidence and be his friend as I know you are mine? We have old links, of course, which makes friendship easy, but I do feel that Alfred needs a friend like you. He has somehow contracted such shallow aims; his ambitions often seem to me so poor, though I do try to be sympathetic. He is naturally

Collection Of Late Abdul Haq Burg Srinagar.

secretive, you know, but I'm sure he isn't happy just now, though he does not open his mind to me. I fear his restlessness makes him extravagant. From some chance words he dropped lately it is evident that we have been spending too much money. As a new-comer, I haven't been able to give him the help he needed. It might have been different if we had come together to face the difficulties and temptations of the new country," wound up Hester with a sigh, some of her fears and perplexities coming sharply into relief.

"I believe you are right," returned Mark, glad to ignore her pitiful request, responding only to the last remark, "though you know the general theory is that the man should come first and prospect."

"Well, in your case I believe it will work all right. Your garnered experience will prove a mine of wisdom to your bride when you bring her to these shores. I'm longing to behold that 'not impossible she,' Mark! When will she arrive?" she asked smilingly, glancing at her companion.

Mark Cheveril did not return her glance, but reflectively stroked his horse's neck. After a moment's silence, he looked at her, and said slowly:

"There is not 'a possible she' for me, Hester."

"Oh, but she's waiting for you now in some English home, though you don't know it! I feel sure you will not choose foolishly, Mark, and I shall be able to give my heart's love to your wife when she comes. You'll tell her you have a friend who will insist on being admitted to her friendship."

To this Mark made no reply except to shake his head. They were now well on their homeward way, and had been riding slowly side by side as they talked. Several vehicles and many native pedestrians had passed them, the highway between St. Thomas's Mount and Madras being also the road to Palaveram and a busy thoroughfare. A dust-begrimed bandy sweeping by did not attract the attention of the riders, for it was the facsimile of many which had already passed and repassed. But it was otherwise with the solitary occupant of the shabby vehicle. The riders had caught his eye while they were still in advance of his carriage. He glanced with keen interest at the handsome pair and their fine horses.

"One of the artillery officers and his wife from the Mount, no doubt," he muttered.

Great, therefore, was Alfred Rayner's surprise in coming to closer quarters, to recognise in the elegant horsewoman, his own wife, and in the supposed officer, Mark Cheveril. Hot indignation soon mastered his surprise. His first impulse was to alight there and then, and confront the couple. But how could he, with becoming dignity, he reflected bitterly, step out of a shabby country-bandy, travel-stained and haggard after a late night at the Palaveram mess?

The sad offices for poor young Hyde would not have detained Mr. Rayner beyond the afternoon of Christmas Day, but he had been prevailed upon to remain and share the festivities of the mess, after which there had been an adjournment to the card-table. It was in the same dawn on which the riders had started for St. Thomas's Mount that he had risen from his night's play, a considerably poorer man than when he sat down. On the previous day, he had driven out in the carriage of one of the officers who had made an appointment to meet him at the Club, but for his return journey he had arranged nothing, and could only commandeer a country vehicle.

The fact of his humble equipage, and even more the consciousness of his haggard, ill-slept appearance, decided him to abstain from showing himself in the tell-tale morning light. Lying well back in the carriage, he covered his face with his sun-topee. He perceived with chagrin, however, that he might have spared his precautions, so engrossed were the riders in their own talk that they did not even turn their eyes towards the humble bandy.

"So this is the game of my most virtuous wife!

Why, she's no better than Leila Baltus would have been under similar circumstances! No sooner do I leave her to her own devices for a single afternoon than she gallops off with a cavalier! Where do I come in, I wonder," Mr. Rayner muttered with a bitter snarl. "No doubt she'll say he's an old friend and all that, but I'll not listen to any of her excuses—nor yours either, Mister Mark. You can find a lady for yourself. You'll not steal my property! By Jove, it would be a good joke to offer him the dark beauty, Leila Baltus, since they are of the same caste! But one thing I can do—and I'll manage it if they don't quicken their pace. I'll hurry on and give them a nasty surprise at the other end—that's to say if they condescend to return to my house. Good, I know a short cut!"

He was now a little in advance of the riders and considered it safe to shout from the window, directing the driver to the shortest rcute.

"Look here, bandy-wallah, I'll give you double fare if you race me to Clive's Road in double quick time!"

The horse was a rough powerful animal, and by dint of frequent applications of the whip, "the fare" was landed at his destination some minutes before the arrival of the riders.

"I do believe Alfred's back from Palaveram already!" exclaimed Hester, as they turned into the compound in Clive's Road. "That must be his hired carriage. What a pity he didn't send for his own comfortable office-bandy instead of that wretched thing!" she added, glancing at the humble vehicle which the bandy-wallah was recklessly guiding on to the turf skirting the avenue to avoid coming into contact with the riders, though there was ample room for both.

"He must have come at a great pace," observed Mark, glancing at the foam-flecked horse. "That horse looks thoroughly pumped out!"

"Oh, poor Alfred, he's always in such a hurry to get back to his writing-table! You'll come and have breakfast with us, Mark? Of course, you must! You will help me to recount everything we've seen. You really owe Alfred a visit since you wouldn't come to our party. He'll be delighted," Hester was adding, while Mark helped her to dismount.

"Speak for yourself, madam," said the master of the house, suddenly emerging from behind one of the green blinds of the verandah, with an angry scowl on his face. "I decline to invite your cavalier to my house!"

Hester flushed, while her companion looked pale and startled. Was this to be the sequel to his harmless effort for Hester's enjoyment?

"Alfred, what do you mean," stammered Hester in dismay, gazing at her husband. His angry frown was intensified by his unkempt appearance, for he had not had time to visit his room.

"Mean!" he repeated. "Well, this time I mean exactly what I say! This house happens to be mine, and I shan't invite a man to breakfast who has stolen such a dirty march on me. Be off with you!"

"I fail to understand your words or your attitude, Mr. Rayner," returned Mark, looking sternly at the haggard face.

"You do? Then I'll enlighten you! What right had you in my absence to drag my wife out on horseback, when you and she know well that I entirely disapprove of such an exercise for a lady? You have insulted me! You have tampered with my reputation, I tell you." His voice rose almost to a scream as he continued: "I'll be the laughing stock of Madras—all those Artillery officers at the Mount—I expect it's there you've been! I caught sight of you on the road. Ha, you didn't think the injured husband was dogging your steps, did you? I'm only thankful you didn't come on to Palaveram and disgrace me there, Hester, but it's bad enough as it is."

"Alfred, you are not yourself," said Hester, distressfully, going up to her husband and putting her hands on his shoulders. "You don't look well! I don't think he knows what he's saying, Mark. You must excuse him," she added, turning beseeching eyes on her friend.

"If I'm not well it's you that have bowled me over. Oh, my goodness, what a pass things have come to," laughed Mr. Rayner hysterically, throwing himself down on a chair, and covering his ghastly face with his hands, he began to whimper.

"I'd better go," whispered Mark, taking Hester's trembling hand in his. "Forgive me for the trouble I have caused you."

"There's nothing to forgive—all the other way. Alfred will see that when he is well again," said Hester, glancing at her husband's cowering figure.

Mark looked at him and then at his wife with a look of ineffable sorrow and pain, then he strode quickly down the broad flight of the verandah steps, mounted his horse and rode away, the syce leading the beautiful Arab which had carried its rider to such pleasant pastures that morning.

Hardly had the sound of the horse's hoofs died away when Mr. Rayner removed his long thin fingers from his face and stole a timid glance at his wife, who stood motionless, her back turned towards him as she gazed out after the retreating rider.

"Now look here, Hester," he said, clearing his throat. "You've played me a shabby trick and no mistake, but I'm not vindictive. My maxim is, you know, to forgive and forget! I'm not sorry I got my teeth into Cheveril, but I quite see now how the whole thing happened. He asked you to ride with him and you did—that's all! Come, let's kiss and be friends!"

He seized one of Hester's hands as she was moving away and raised it to his lips, but for once his swift repentance was wholly repellent to her. She quickly perceived that he was anxious to act a part, that his calmness was only feigned, that he still nursed a bitter grudge against Mark. She could see it in his eyes, in the sinister air with which he listened to her brief restrained narration of the simple circumstances which had led to this morning's expedition.

"All is right between us, Hester! I accept your apologies," he said patronisingly, as he rose briskly from his chair and hurried to his morning bath.

When they met at breakfast it was Hester who was silent, and looked jaded and stricken, while her husband seemed eager in his efforts to be specially polite and agreeable.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was the day of the great ball of the season. Alfred Rayner had often expatiated to Hester on the delights of this festivity at Government House at which he had been present in the previous year. He now looked forward with glee to make his entrance with his beautiful wife on his arm. Judging from his gaiety of spirit, one would have thought that the painful incident on the return of the riders from St. Thomas's Mount was entirely effaced from his mind, though only two short days had actually elapsed since it had occurred. To Hester the days had brought no mitigation of her pain, although her husband seemed to take it for granted that she shared his preoccupation concerning the ball. He could not help perceiving, however, as he looked across the table this morning that she seemed pale and strained, just when he was eager she should be looking her very best.

"I'll tell you what you need, Hester—the best recipe for looking as fresh as my English rose must do to-night. You drive to the beach this afternoon. Don't go gadding with anybody, just sit in your carriage and let the sea breeze fan your cheeks, then there's no doubt who will be the belle of the ball to-night! I wish I could have gone to the beach and kept guard over you, my dear; unfortunately I have an appointment after business hours to-day. But if my wife carries the palm to-night this her 'humble slave' will be in the third heavens!"

Hester was nothing loth to fall in with her husband's suggestion. The prospect of a quiet hour within the sound of the waves was welcome to her. She felt weary and dispirited, and had thought many times of telling her husband she did not feel able to join in the festivity of the evening. The episode, which seemed to have passed all too lightly over him, had left a deep mark on her sensitive heart. Not only did she feel wounded and shamed at the exhibition her husband had made of himself, but she mourned the loss of her faithful friend. After being so wantonly insulted, never, probably, would Mark Cheveril and she meet again. Not even his chivalrous kindness could be proof against the unjust taunts levelled against him by the man she now felt ashamed to own as her husband. She suspected indeed that his attitude that morning was assumed on purpose to put a stop to the friendship, and in losing Mark, she felt sorrowfully, she had lost her only real friend—except indeed, Mrs. Fellowes. But never, even to her, could she unfold the pass to which her husband's extraordinary behaviour had brought matters. She must go on suffering in absolute silence, she decided, with a more conscious effort at resignation to her lot than she had yet made. Truly the tools were sharp, she thought, with a long-drawn sigh, recalling Mark's parable of the rough block in the making. Much indeed was being chiselled off, but as Mark had said, they must trust to the Master Sculptor.

Only yesterday there had come to Hester what she interpreted as a farewell gift from the friend she might see no more. She knew the token must be from him, though the brown book bore no evidence as to its sender. She felt sure it was none other than Mark when she read the marked poem. That metaphor of the Potter's Wheel had already become like an inspiration to her. The book lay on her knees now as she drove to the beach, and drawing it from beneath the carriage-wrap, she turned to the poem to ponder once more its deep meaning in reference to herself.

All her life she had been brought up in a religious atmosphere, though her attitude towards that side of life had been in part more traditional than personal. It was only lately since the sore need of her heart craved a refuge that she had come to find the " very present help " for herself, and now every hour of every day she was seeking it and finding it. During the last hours she had travelled far on that eventful journey. She felt that till travelling days were done, and perhaps in the " new beginning " of which Mark had spoken, she would always connect the crisis in her life with the noble words of " Rabbi Ben Ezra."

The carriage had now drawn up on the long terraced promenade which skirts the sea shore—the then favourite meeting place of Madras residents at this evening hour. On this afternoon, however, society was evidently reserving itself for the entertainment at Government House, and was conspicuous by its absence. A regimental band usually played at the Marine Villa, but the stand was unoccupied now, silence and emptiness reigned.

Hester did not regret either the music or the company. She directed her coachman to draw up at a point where she always thought the breeze seemed to blow freshest from the sea, and sat engrossed in her book, though the light was fading. She heard the footsteps of two pedestrians on the asphalt pavement, but did not raise her eyes. Presently the pair returned from their stroll, and this time one of them halted in front of the landau, saying :

" Good evening ! Like us, I see you have come for a whiff of the sea breeze ! "

Great was Hester's surprise when she heard the familiar voice.

" Mark," she exclaimed, and the face which had worn such a wistful expression lit up with pleasure. Once again, at all events, she was destined to exchange greetings with her friend. But she now perceived that he was not alone. On the pavement stood an elderly man, his dark searching eyes surmounted by a pair of rather fierce eyebrows, a smooth shaven face revealing a sensitive mouth and well-formed chin. The searching eyes were fixed on her with a distinct air of interest.

"My chief wishes to make your acquaintance," pursued Mark. "Mr. Worsley—Mrs. Rayner."

"We passed you when we were proceeding on our prowl, but you were so intent on your book my young friend seemed timid about disturbing you," said the Collector, with a smile and an amused glance at Mark. "But I was not to be cheated out of an opportunity of meeting Mr. Cheveril's old friend."

There was a mixture of courtesy and kindliness in his manner which proved a ready passport to Hester's heart, and also brought a joyous smile to Mark's face; for this was not, he knew well, the tone of greeting Mr. Worsley was used to give to the ladies of the station. Underneath his manner to little Mrs. Samptor there was always a veiled though kindly contempt, while Mrs. Goldring's portion was often an unmistakable scowl. But in his manner to Hester there was a winning combination of immediate belief and liking, something fatherly too which Mark had occasionally felt in his attitude to himself. Another carriage now made its appearance and drew up alongside of Hester's landau.

"I felt sure that these were your syces' liveries, my dear," called Mrs. Fellowes, not at first perceiving that Hester was engaged in conversation. Then she observed the two gentlemen, and Mark quickly went round to shake hands, claiming her as one of his earliest friends in Madras.

Meanwhile the Collector pursued his talk with Hester, saying presently:

"Now, Mrs. Rayner, take the advice of an experienced Madrasee, descend from your chariot, and have a walk in this delightful sea-breeze. No doubt you are due to-night at Government House like Cheveril and myself. We must obey orders, I suppose, and put in an appearance for a little. I hope your friend will enjoy the ball. Puranapore is a dull place for a young man, little company except a sombre old fellow like me."

"Oh, but he told me he was so happy with you, Mr. Worsley. I think it made me feel a little jealous, as I was his only friend here at first."

"That's where we stand, is it? All the more reason we should make it up, Mrs. Rayner. Nothing is more conducive to driving away evil spirits of all kinds than a walk on the sea-shore."

Mr. Worsley smilingly offered his hand to Hester to help her to alight.

"Cheveril, we're off for a stroll," he said, looking back at the young man, who still stood by the side of Mrs. Fellowes' carriage; and he now suggested that she should imitate the example of her friend. She acquiesced, and they were soon following the other pair of walkers.

"I always know from the pose of my chief's head whether he is happy with his companion or not. Unfortunately he too often shows that he is not so," said Mark.

"You seem entirely satisfied with the result in this instance, Mr. Cheveril," returned Mrs. Fellowes, with a frank smile. "But who could be otherwise? She is so dear and sweet."

"Well, the fact is there is triumph to me as well as satisfaction. I didn't exactly have a bet with Mrs. Rayner, but I prophesied that when she met Mr. Worsley she would come under his spell; while she evidently thought the reverse would happen. I feel quite easy in my mind now. I can see the spell is mutual."

"I expect Mr. Worsley is not a man who always does himself justice by any means. The Colonel sometimes deplores that he gives so much more encouragement to the Mahomedans than to the Hindus at Puranapore. The Campbells are friends of ours, so perhaps we hear most on the other side."

"Yes, that's a vexed question," replied Mark gravely. "But the Collector is getting his eyes opened to some things that were hidden from him for a time. Events are marching. You see he is so often away on tour. The town of Puranapore is but a very small corner of his dominion. His District is immense, and he takes as much interest in it as an English squire does in his acres—very much the same kind of interest too. His pride in land reclaimed and made to blossom is delightful to see. He has often made me ride miles out of the way with him to show me such a tract with its changed face. He would have made an ideal Forest Officer if he had not been Collector of the Revenue. Lately when we were camping, he pointed to a once fever-haunted jungle he had redeemed by draining the dreaded area. He smiled and said, 'I was just thinking last night as I read Tennyson's 'Northern Farmer,' that I could point to this bit of land made wholesome as my only good deed, like the old farmer who pinned his hope of salvation to his 'stubbing of Thornaby waste!' "

"You speak of his reading Tennyson, Mr. Cheveril? I thought one of his peculiarities was that he never read—that there wasn't a book to be picked up in his house? I've heard his bungalow at Puranapore described as the most dismal of abodes."

"Oh, yes, the Collector does read at times, and he does what is better, he thinks. He has a more original mind than most people, I assure you," argued Mark, not willing to admit the truth of the assertion concerning the absence of anything like a library from the Collector's shelves.

"Pity he doesn't hit it off with his wife, isn't it?" remarked Mrs. Fellowes, who, Mark could see, was one of those who had imbibed a prejudice against the man he had come to love. "Perhaps you didn't know he was married, Mr. Cheveril, but he is! His wife lives in Belgravia and he here. It is said he didn't even go to see her the last time he was at home, and yet they are not legally separated, and I believe, he sends her heaps of money!"

"Well, you see, I don't know the Honourable Mrs. Worsley," said Mark shortly. In one of his rare moments of self-revelation the elder man had laid bare to the younger the history of an ill-assorted marriage and its consequences, which, Mark decided, more by inference than from details, was the source of much that had warped a life, which Felix Worsley himself described as like "a blasted jungle tree"; though Mark thought he could still trace in it the noblest characteristics of the English oak.

"Well, I must say the Collector of Puranapore has a warm partisan in you, Mr. Cheveril," returned Mrs. Fellowes warmly, "and I like you for it!"

The pair in front had now turned their steps and came towards them.

"I'm reminding Mrs. Rayner that if I walk her off her feet she won't be able to dance so lightly with you to-night as I desire to see, Cheveril," said Mr. Worsley, with a smile which his Assistant had learnt to love.

On being introduced to Mrs. Fellowes he seemed to find that he had various links with her and they paired off together, leaving the two old friends in company.

"Oh, Mark, how delightful he is," exclaimed Hester, her face all aglow. "I haven't seen anybody so nice since I parted with my father!"

"Ah, then you have capitulated, just as I hoped. But I'm not going to be hard on you for your former state of siege. I knew the victory was sure, and it has come partly because he took to you at once, I could see. My chief is sometimes rather bearish, I admit. I tremble for the offences he may give at the gathering to-night. He's a grand bit of marble, Hester—to take up our simile of St. Thomas's Mount!"

"But has the chipping process begun, Mark? Though he was so nice to me I confess he talked very hopelessly, very cynically, about some things."

"Oh, yes, the process is going on! But we must not forget in that process one day is as a thousand years with the Great Sculptor," said Mark softly, as he glanced up at the dark blue vault where the great moon was already rising, silvering the vast expanse of waters.

"But, Mark," said Hester, suddenly preparing to plunge into the topic which he fain would have avoided, "how can you meet me like this—how can you ever speak to me again after what happened that morning? Oh, the shame, the misery of it," she added, her voice faltering. "And I was so anxious that poor Alfred should come under your influence! You remember I was pleading for that on our ride home, little thinking that all was going to end as it did—that things were going to happen so soon that would make a great gulf between you. Will you try to believe that really he was not himself that morning? Something at Palaveram must have upset him dreadfully or he could never have spoken so to you. Can you ever forgive him?"

Mark felt glad that Hester should treat the episode in this light and not as a proof of her husband's utter unworthiness.

"Surely we must make allowance for others when we need so much forgiveness for ourselves," said Mark, in a moved tone. "I saw your husband was much unnerved. I hardly think our morning ride could be the cause. Try to forget it, Hester! Treat it like a bad dream—we awake and it is gone."

"Oh, thank you! You don't know how your words comfort me. I thought you would never speak to me again. Now I must tell you what it was that brought me any comfort. It was that poem—"Rabbi Ben Ezra—in the book you sent me. That it should come from you, who I feared would not look at either of us again, seemed to me the doing of an angel!"

"A very earthly messenger, I assure you," said Mark, shaking his head. "But I'm glad you came on that poem. It has been a possession to me for long."

"It will be a possession to me always," returned Hester in a moved voice. "But what am I thinking of? I must really be off home at once. Alfred may be there and wondering what keeps me," she added, with a frightened air which went to the young man's heart.

He led her at once to her carriage, and saw the lamps duly lit; then after a hurried good-bye to Mrs. Fellowes and the Collector, she was driven swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE Banqueting Hall, as that important adjunct of Government House, Madras, is called, scintillated with light. The lower branches of the noble trees which line the approach were hung with innumerable lamps of variegated colours, while the great white building gave forth a resplendent glow from its many windows. The colonnades of pillars at its entrance were reached by an immense flight of steps, the centre of which was covered by a broad strip of crimson cloth. Along either side were ranged rows of peons in long scarlet coats, their sashes belted crossways on their chests, ornamented by bright badges, their neatly folded turbans, their dignified and deferential mien, all contributing to the impressive effect of the scene.

Through the wide open doors one caught glimpses of more pillars in the entrance hall. The banisters and staircase landings were decorated with great pots of glossy greenery. Peons were flitting about; an aide-de-camp, gorgeous in gold lace, his nether man cased in tights and Hessian boots, was in waiting in the hall; while groups of gentlemen, both civil and military, stood talking together preparatory to making their entrance.

The fashionable unpunctuality of arrival which prevails at home functions did not at this period find favour at Government House. Most of the guests of the evening were now streaming in as quickly as the thronging of their equipages on the great gravel sweep outside would permit. The ladies cloak-rooms were vocal with a chorus of English voices as Hester Rayner entered. It seemed to her a happy babble as she smilingly returned the greetings of various acquaintances, while she was being divested of her cloak by one of the many Eurasian attendants.

Miss Clarice Glanton, robed in iridescent filmy gauze, glided dragon-fly-like towards Hester, with a gracious smile on her face.

"Got your card full up, of course, Hester? Your husband says I may call you so, and I mean henceforth to avail myself of his permission. Well, how stands your card?"

"My card! I'm afraid I haven't even thought about it yet," replied Hester simply.

"Why, I thought you were looking so happy that you must surely be in luck! I think I know somebody who will be having many favours from you to-night, but he didn't rise to my bait, though I showed him I had still one or two blanks to fill."

Hester looked so evidently uncomprehending that she added:

"After all, it's only tit-for-tat! If you are to have possession of the Puranapore Assistant, I'm going to have pity on your forsaken husband! I was actually benevolent enough to promise him not less than three dances when he came a-begging to my door this afternoon"; and Miss Glanton glanced with a malicious smile at the young wife.

Her tone and her information both jarred on Hester. She recalled that her husband had pleaded a business engagement as his reason for not accompanying her to the beach, but she held her peace; indeed there was no pause for further talk. Both ladies were swept forward to join their gentlemen in the corridor and take their places for presentation.

Alfred Rayner had been waiting all impatience. Casting a rapid glance on his wife, the result of which seemed satisfying to his vanity, he offered his arm with a gratified smile.

"Come, my English rose is bound to win the prize," he whispered.

Taking their places in the long stream of guests, they moved slowly along a side aisle under the gallery till they reached the neighbourhood of the dais, then their turn came to ascend the flat crimson steps. The A.D.C.-in-waiting stood receiving the cards of the guests and announced their names.

Hester, with a grace which few could equal, at length made her curtsey to the Queen's representative, His Excellency the Governor of Madras, a stout-built, elderly man with scanty dark hair, a bushy grey beard, a pair of keen, shrewd eyes which seemed to take in all his surroundings at a glance. His hostess-daughter stood by his side receiving the guests, while near by were two younger daughters who bowed and smiled in recognition of acquaintances and chatted with members of the house-party gathered on the dais; while the presented guests took their places among the surrounding groups who stood watching the ceremony in progress.

None did so with more pleasure than Hester, whose artistic eye was glamoured by the beautiful blending of colours throughout the stately hall which would have made a worthy setting for any pageant. Every style and colour of uniform was represented, from the brilliant scarlet and gold of the Staff to the pale blue and silver of the Madras Cavalry, the drab of some of the Native Infantry corps, and the artillery officers from the Mount whose uniform was the short, slashed jacket, which, though becoming to tall, slender figures, was by no means so to the fat old Artillery colonels stepping about, serving as foils to the slim young men.

The presentation now seemed at an end except in the case of a few late-comers. His Excellency had turned to talk with some members of the house-party. The regimental band, stationed in the front gallery, was giving forth its first strains of music with stirring effect. A distinguished soldier visitor from North India led forth the hostess-daughter of the Governor, who, etiquette demanded, should open the ball.

The beautiful shiny parquet floor was presently peopled with couples, and from the band came the favourite waltz air of the period, " The Blue Danube."

Hester would have been quite contented to gaze on the picturesque scene as a spectator only, but though she had not taken time by the forelock like Miss Glanton, partners were not wanting. She was at once sought after and began to enter into the rythmical waltz movement.

She was glad to see that her husband was enjoying the favours of Miss Glanton, but as yet she had not caught sight of Mark Cheveril or his chief, and began to fear that at the last moment Mr. Worsley had devised some specious excuse for absenting himself. On being whirled, however, to the neighbourhood of the dais, she perceived the Collector descending from it, his arm linked in that of one of the Government house-party who seemed delighted to have captured him, and was now leading him off to one of the comparatively quiet side-aisles to pursue their talk unmolested by the jostling dancers. Mr. Worsley's face broke into a pleased smile as he happened to catch a glimpse in the mazes of the waltz of his late companion on the beach, and he and his soldier friend stood watching her for a moment before they retired to seek a quiet nook.

Presently Hester also caught sight of Mark dancing with the younger daughter of the Governor, a graceful girl who danced to perfection, and not a few eyes followed the handsome pair.

Mark, though courteous in his duty to his partner, seemed somewhat absent-minded. More than once she noticed his eyes following the movements of the beautiful Mrs. Rayner. He was in truth trying to divine how things had gone with her since they had parted that afternoon. He had some fear that on her return to Clive's Road she might again have had to encounter a repetition of the scene which still haunted him like a nightmare. Great, therefore, was his surprise, after he had conducted his partner to a seat, and was standing gazing at the bright scene, to be accosted by Alfred Rayner.

"Good evening, Cheveril!" he said jauntily. "Glad to see you were honoured by one of the Duke's daughters. I shouldn't have presumed—but nothing venture nothing win!"

Mark, not having any reply ready, maintained a grave silence, which the speaker evidently translated into an attitude of offence towards himself, and still assuming a conciliatory tone, he said:

"Look here, Cheveril! I want to apologise in dust and ashes for making such an ass of myself the other morning. The fact is a night at Palaveram mess makes a wreck of a fellow. You must forgive and forget my nasty fit of temper, and as a proof of this do go and ask Hester for the next dance. I see she is at this moment wasting her fragrance on what I should call 'the desert air'—talking Mrs. Fellowes!"

"Thanks for the suggestion! I shall certainly speak to both ladies with pleasure," returned Mark.

Whereupon Mr. Rayner seemed to take for granted that his favour deserved a return. He laid his hand on Mark's sleeve, saying in a coaxing tone:

"I say, Cheveril, I'm going to ask a favour of you! Will you, like a good fellow, introduce me to Mr. Worsley?—or rather, I should put it—bring me again under his notice, for we were introduced at the Club some time after my arrival in Madras. I left my card on him, but no doubt he has now forgotten the name of the humble barrister."

Mark fervently wished that the Collector of Puranapore had forgotten it, for he feared the requested introduction would prove a thorny business; in fact he quickly decided that for Mr. Rayner's own sake it must not be ventured on. Looking at him with frank, honest eyes he said quickly:

"I'm afraid I must not, Rayner, though in other circumstances nothing would have given me greater pleasure."

He felt greatly relieved when at this moment a Club acquaintance claimed his company and led him off.

"'Other circumstances,' forsooth, just like your half-caste impudence!" muttered Mr. Rayner, as he turned on his heel and moved away. The band struck up a new waltz and he remembered that Clarice Glanton had promised him this dance. Threading his way towards her, they were soon in the vortex of the shining floor. Clarice noticed that her companion's gay mood was now replaced by an absent, gloomy air. She began at once to chaff him concerning the change, and Rayner, who was often communicative when reticence would have stood him in better stead, burst forth :

"Oh, it's that young jackanapes, Cheveril, who always rubs me up the wrong way!"

"What, green-eyed jealousy again! I can't see you've any cause for it at this moment. He hasn't once been dancing with your wife, though he has had several partners—and dances well, I observe. As for your precious Hester, she seems glued to a dark corner there, no doubt exchanging views with Mrs. Fellowes about flannels and petticoats for their 'Friendly'!"

"You're always so literal, Clarice. I don't ever harp on one string! It doesn't happen to be jealousy of Cheveril at this moment. Rayner's wife, like Caesar's, is above suspicion! I'll tell you what's bothering me. I happen, for business reasons, to want to have a word with the Collector of Puranapore, and I asked Cheveril to introduce me to him. The surly beggar shuffles out of it in the coolest manner possible. Very rude of him, isn't it? No wonder I'm a bit ruffled!" Mr. Rayner wound up peevishly.

"An introduction to old Mr. Worsley! Why, if that will make you a smiling partner there's no difficulty about it. He's an old chum of the pater's. I've known him since I was a little mite of a child, and he has always a smile for me, for all they say he's such an old bear. Wait till this dance is finished and we'll seek him out."

Miss Glanton was as good as her word. The iridescent-robed maiden looked very charming, when, with her red lips parted showing shining white teeth, she approached the Collector, holding out her hand:

"Clarice, of course," said Mr. Worsley, "transformed into a dragon-fly or something of the kind."

"So glad you happen to know me this time," said the girl airily.

"Well, I don't take credit for any special intelligence, young lady, but you haven't grown, for instance, since we last met!"

"Mercifully not! I don't admire tall women," she replied spitefully, her eye travelling to Hester's graceful willowy figure gliding past with Mark Cheveril. Then glancing at the man by her side she recalled her present mission.

"I want to introduce my friend here who wishes to know the Collector of Puranapore. Mr. Rayner—Mr. Worsley!"

The barrister made a profound bow, lowering his eyelids as he did so. When he raised them, Mr. Worsley's nod had changed to a frown. Recovering himself instantly he turned quickly to the lady, saying lightly: "I hope you are enjoying the dance, Clarice? Plenty of partners, eh?"

Alfred Rayner divined that he would fain have added, "Of a better sort than your present one."

"Well, seeing we haven't the solace of dancing like you, Sir Frederick and I were about to seek the distraction of the supper-table," pursued Mr. Worsley, glancing round for his friend. "Good evening, Clarice! Tell your father not to forget my little dinner at the Club to-morrow night!" Then he turned on his heel and walked away without even bestowing a single glance on Clarice's companion.

"The naughty old man, he didn't catch on at all," said Clarice, puckering her forehead and looking at her companion with a slightly embarrassed air. "I'm afraid you are vexed—but not with me, I hope. I tried to do my level best."

"Sure you did, Clarice," returned Mr. Rayner, scowling. "But I'll tell you what has happened. That puppy Cheveril has been slandering me to the Collector. That's what it is!"

"More than likely," murmured Clarice, feeling uncomfortable, and pondering what ailed Mr. Worsley at the young barrister. There must be something rather serious or he would never have given him such a downright snub, she decided, and was nothing loth to exchange her discomfited partner for a lively Artilleryman from the Mount, and in a few minutes had forgotten the incident.

Not so Alfred Rayner. He wandered about moodily, occasionally trying to catch a glimpse of Hester and discover what she was about; his ruffled temper being by no means soothed on perceiving that she was again dancing with Mark. On issuing from the supper-room which he had visited alone, he chanced to find himself behind Mr. Worsley and his friend. He watched them as they walked along arm-in-arm till they came to a gap in the rows of white pillars that lined the side-aisle under the gallery, which were all gaily festooned to-night, so that the pair stood in the midst of the greenery watching the giddy maze which, though the hours were flying, did not seem to lose any of its fascination for the dancers. There was at the moment a slightly cleared space on the shining floor, and along it came a couple, evidently engaged in bright talk.

"Now look there, Worsley, that young man and maiden make a pretty picture, don't they? 'Love's young dream,' I should say, and no mistake!" The bright blue eyes of the gallant soldier rested with an admiring smile on the pair advancing with slow and graceful steps, all unconscious of being observed by any.

"Now there you are again, Sir Frederick, letting your romantic spirit run away with you! Commend me to a soldier for that sort of thing!" returned Mr. Worsley, with a laugh. "'Love's young dream,' forsooth! The lady is already a wife, and the youth, who I admit is a rarely comely one, is my Assistant at Puranapore. Now you see how your romance tumbles like a house of cards!"

"Humph! Well, at all events its spirit remains. The pair do look as if they were enjoying each other's company vastly"; and the ruddy, weather-beaten face lit up with a benevolent smile as Mark and Hester passed out of their range.

"I only wish it could be as you say," said Mr. Worsley, with a shrug of his shoulders. "The girl's husband is, I fear, a thoroughly *mauvais sujet*, and she is as good as gold—quite charming. By the way, you must have known her people—Bellairs, a Worcestershire family. Of course you did, and she's very like her handsome uncle Charlie."

"Why she must be the daughter of Philip Bellairs, the parson."

"She is! But how her father came to allow such an unprincipled scoundrel to carry off his daughter, passes me to understand. A creature not fit to touch the hem of her garment. I have a suspicion that he is——"

Mr. Worsley lowered his voice. It no longer reached the ear of the listener who had been cowering on the other side of the festooned pillar, hiding among its greenery. But Alfred Rayner had heard more than enough. With a flame of fury in his eyes, his long fingers clenched, he staggered forth to the nearest verandah. Leaning on its white balustrade he gazed with unseeing eyes on the peaceful, dark blue, star-bespangled vault, his heart a prey to misery and wrath.

"So I'm 'an unprincipled scoundrel,' am I?—

not fit to touch the hem of my own wife's garment, forsooth! Well, he's given me my character anyhow! I know now what to expect from that quarter! No more white-flag business for me—all red, red, red!" he muttered, gnashing his teeth like a beast of prey. "I'll see Zynool to-morrow and put him up to a trick or two that will perhaps make Mister Felix Worsley squirm in his lounging chair!"

He stood motionless by the balustrade for some time, his haggard face resting on his long thin hands as he hatched his evil plot.

Perhaps it was the peace of the starry night that spoke to him, for there came stealing upon him at this unexpected juncture one of those moments of self-revelation which visit even the basest and shallowest of human hearts. Its searchlight seemed suddenly to reveal to the man vistas that stretched back even to childish days. He saw himself again the peevish, greedy little boy who wanted everything for himself only, and domineered over the smaller boys, who cringed to the bully; who lied and cheated on the class-bench and in the playground, hating better boys than himself and loving to hear his doting aunt assure him that there was no one so handsome or so smart as he. Yes, to be sure, Aunt Flo was responsible for a good deal! Had not fibs rolled from her speech as hairpins from her black shiny chignon? Had she not reared him to all kinds of petty deceptions till he became proud of successfully conducted small villainies? How spiteful was her attitude to any boy who seemed likely to outstrip him in the race at school or college, and how invariably she succeeded in inoculating him with her jealousy till he had not a single friend left to whom he could turn with frank loyal friendship!

What chance had he from the beginning with such an environment, he asked himself querulously. And now, after all his efforts to secure a good social and professional footing, he saw himself a distrusted man, for in other eyes he had been able to trace something of the same scornful aloofness which he saw in Mr. Worsley's. It was bitter indeed! And Hester, what of her? Perhaps it was too true that he was unworthy to touch the hem of her garment; but she, at least, had not turned the cold shoulder on him yet! Never again would he subject her to these vile ebullitions of temper. He would try to make her forget the scene of the other morning, he vowed, as he gazed on the moon-silvered landscape and drank in some of its peace.

He recalled Hester's look of kindness as they had driven home together on that last Sunday evening from the little mission church on the Esplanade to which she had been eager to take him, and he had thought himself exceedingly complaisant in agreeing, for once, to accompany her to the "unfashionable conventicle," as he called it, where Native Christians, not to speak of Eurasians, sat side by side with the little company of English folk.

The preacher that evening was a desperately earnest-looking man with searching eyes and a penetrating voice. He had unfolded to his hearers one of the old promises from the Sacred Book, the promise that to those who turned to Him, God would give back the years the cankerworm had eaten. As the organ-like voice of the gallant pleader for God had fallen on his ear, Alfred Rayner acknowledged to himself that he was giving more heed to a "parson's words" than he had ever done in his whole life. And there had been a soft pleading light in Hester's eyes as they met his, the silent meaning of which he could not mistake. What a pretty picture she had made as she sat with reverent uplifted face, her arm round a bright little English child whose parents had brought her to this evening service! The little maid had been assiduous in offering her hymn-book to the winning visitor, and as a supreme mark of confidence had finally deposited her doll on Hester's knee, and then sat nestling her fair shining curls against her arm. The picture came back to him now, a tableau graven on his memory. Would that a little flaxen head like that were their very own! What a changed man such a pledge of love would make of him! How truly the promise would then be fulfilled on which the preacher had dwelt in eloquent words! Then surely would the years eaten by the cankerworm be given back! But no, the dream was fading. He shivered as a light breeze blew softly through the verandah, and turned his gaze from the starry heavens, muttering bitterly:

"The cankerworm has fretted through and through! Old Worsley ain't so far wrong after all. I've got the making of a scoundrel in me. Ha, ha! On the make, am I? Well, I'll give him a sample of my wares by-and-by if Zynool will stir up! I declare this silly fit of introspection has made me quite nervy, or the draughty verandah has given me a chill. I must pull myself together."

Having no mind to join the festive gathering again, Rayner crept back to the outer edges of the supper tables, and seeing a magnum of champagne, which he decided was the best recipe for steadying his nerves, he partook eagerly. He then took his stand again in the wide aisle and scanned the ballroom, which was now rapidly emptying. The Governor and his party had retired, though various guests still lingered, but the room was beginning to wear the air of "a banquet-hall deserted."

Rayner glanced round furtively for his wife, and presently descried Mark Cheveril in earnest conversation with another civilian.

"So far good," he muttered, "he at least is not taking advantage of my absence to enjoy himself with this wife of mine whom Mr. Worsley places on such a pedestal!"

But after he had gazed out from his corner a little longer, he perceived a combination which aroused his anger.

On one of the sofas placed about for tired guests not far from where Mark stood, sat Hester, and by her side, his own now declared enemy, the Collector of Puranapore. Mr. Worsley was smiling as he talked, and his conversation was evidently pleasing, judging from Hester's look of interest and animation. The topic was, in fact, reminiscences of her uncle, who had been Felix Worsley's particular friend at Oxford.

Striding rapidly across the room, Rayner laid his hand on his wife's arm, saying sharply :

" Come along, Mrs. Rayner, our carriage stops the way."

Hardly allowing her time even to bow a good-night to her companion, and himself ignoring his presence, he hurried her away, keeping his hold on her arm till she reached the door of the cloak-room.

" Alfred, why were you so rude ? " asked Hester in dismay. " Do you know it was Mr. Worsley, whom you wanted so much to meet, that I was talking to ? "

" I knew it only too well, madam ! Therefore it was I chivied you off as I did. Sorry I interrupted what seemed, judging from your appearance, a fascinating *tête-a-tête,* but a man must use his discretion where his own wife is concerned ! Don't be in any hurry, I've got to summon the carriage yet," he called, as Hester, dumb with shame and vexation, was disappearing into the cloak-room. " I'll send and let you know when Mrs. Rayner's carriage stops the way ! " Then he added to himself : " Meanwhile I want a little more champagne to steady my nerves after all this worry."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FEW weeks had elapsed since Alfred Rayner had spurned the searchlight which might have shown him some of the plague spots of his own heart. They had proved very trying weeks in the house in Clive's Road. Hester was striving to be tactful and tender, but her husband's wayward outbursts of temper made things very hard for her, and even outsiders began to mark the change in her looks.

"The Madras climate is already beginning to tell on Mrs. Rayner! Her bloom has been short-lived, but I expect she will soon be carried off to the hills and get her good looks restored at Ooty," were the remarks passed from lip to lip, but none divined the true cause of the young wife's weary mien.

In official circles the yearly migration to the hills had already begun. The Governor and his suite had departed, and the constant succession of gaieties were over for the season. This indeed proved a relief to Hester, but it threw her husband more on his own resources, which was threatening to prove disastrous. He now habitually lounged at the Club and frequented card-playing resorts, returning late, often morose and self-accusing. His moods, whatever they were, always reacted on his wife, who was indeed learning patience through suffering.

One evening, however, he came home with an air of buoyancy which was now very unusual to him. He had hardly alighted from his mail-phaeton when he hurried to Hester, saying eagerly:

"I've got a project to unfold, my dear! What do you say to a jaunt to Calcutta? You're looking pale. It is warming up here in this southern hole. Three days at sea will do you a world of good, not to speak of a jolly holiday in Calcutta!"

“ But, Alfred, this is surely all very sudden ! Are you really thinking of a voyage all the way to Calcutta ? ” faltered Hester, whose breath was almost taken away by her husband’s eagerness.

“ Of course I am, and do you suppose I’d leave you all alone here ? The trip will do you ever so much good—break the monotony that creeps over one like a fungus in this humdrum place. I’ve just written to accept Melford’s invitation, so there’s no drawing back now. You remember he brought out his bride the steamer after ours ? It’s some weeks since he wrote asking us to pay them a visit. It didn’t seem to me possible then, but I’ve made up my mind to take the step now. The truth is, I have a desire to interview the reigning partner of my father’s old firm, Truelove Brothers. My allowance comes to me with exemplary regularity, it is true, but it may be they owe me a much larger sum than I get. At all events, being a minor no longer, it’s high time I should be investigating these matters for myself. So pack up, my darling, and let’s have a second honeymoon on the ocean’s breast ! ”

The proposal had many attractions for Hester. Not that she resented the alleged monotony of life on the plains of India as some around her were continually complaining they did, but truly there had been a monotony of jars and frets in her intercourse with her husband of late, and she longed to break the cruel spell. He was looking ill and haggard, perhaps the change of scene and the contact with old acquaintances might help him ; and she also looked forward to seeing the great city with its historical associations.

With renewed hope she set about preparations for the journey. Soon all the household at Clive’s Road were sharing the exciting news that Dorai and Dosani were going on a holiday, and the ayah and the dressing boy were to accompany their master and mistress. Hester had written to Mrs. Fellowes to tell her of the pending departure, and all preparations were well advanced when her husband, returning on the following evening at a late hour, announced with hesitating mien that he feared the sea journey must be given up, that he was obliged for business reasons to include Bombay in his trip, and five days in the train, which was then the length of the journey, was unthinkable for such a frail creature as she was. Moreover, he had that day met a friend whom he desired, also for business reasons, to have as his companion, and he being a bachelor preferred to travel *en garcon*. This they could do much more cheaply than if they " were humbugged by wives," as his friend elegantly expressed it.

So it came about that Hester's quick hope came to a sudden end. For a little she felt keen disappointment, enhanced by the knowledge that in her husband's change of plans there was a large element of wilful selfishness. She accepted the decision without a murmuring word, and felt almost surprised to perceive the strain of penitence which marked his manner as she cheerfully busied herself in making all preparations for his journey.

" I don't half like leaving you alone like this," he remarked on the morning of his departure. " I've been thinking of a nice plan for you. Suppose you write to Mrs. Fellowes and suggest a visit to her ! "

Hester, however, declined to fall in with the proposal, assuring her husband that she would find plenty to occupy her during her solitary weeks. But on the same afternoon when Mrs. Fellowes called to say farewell to her friend, and found to her astonishment that the hoped-for holiday was abandoned as far as Hester was concerned, she at once insisted that she should take up her abode at Royapooram during her husband's absence. Thither Hester went on the day after Mr. Rayner's departure to find rest and solace in the companionship of these good friends.

Alfred Rayner's purpose in going to Calcutta was not very definite in his own mind. He looked on it in the light of an experiment—a gamble. It was, in fact, the need of money which urged him to try to gauge the capacities of Truelove Brothers, and to make the attempt to bleed them more heavily. Zynool's loan had tided him over a period, but financial embarrassments were becoming pressing, and he decided to exhaust the possibilities of help from the quarter from whence help had come with such unfailing regularity longer than he could remember. It is true his aunt had always volubly assured him that his allowance was all the firm of Truelove Brothers had in store for him. But what were the assertions of a woman like Aunt Flo, he thought with scorn, so ignorant, so prevaricating, as he knew her to be. More than likely he had been up to this date the victim of a cruel conspiracy to defraud him of his legal rights as the son of one of the late partners of the firm. He had, however, to remind himself that his recent endeavours to probe the matter by a sharp query in a letter had elicited a firm though courteous reply that the allowance which he received was the limit of his claim. But now, since his financial condition was becoming desperate, unless indeed he changed his whole scale of living, he had resolved to make the attempt to sift the matter in person. The *détour* to Bombay might indeed have been well dispensed with, and had only been yielded to at the solicitation of one of the most worthless of his recent acquaintances.

So it happened that when Alfred Rayner took his seat in the crowded train *en route* for Calcutta his purse was more empty than he liked to contemplate. Prudence had even dictated that he should stoop to a seat in a third-class carriage. He sat in a corner wedged in between closely packed natives, his sun topee drawn over his eyes, the lower part of his face covered by his pocket-handkerchief. But he could not shut his ears to the discordant babel of voices round him, for every third-class passenger in the East is nothing if not vociferous. His elegant person was continually prodded by angular packages, his delicate nostrils, in spite of all precautions, assailed by the most forbidding odours.

The journey seemed interminable. The slight refreshment he had been able to secure as the train was in motion he could hardly eat in such repulsive surroundings. At last the express swung into Howrah station, but even then Rayner's gnawing discomfort was not at an end.

He had been congratulating himself that as he had not mentioned the hour of his arrival, he would not be met at the station. But he reckoned too much on Mr. Melford's ignorance of the time-table. On peering out of his box-like carriage window, he caught sight of his friend in eager search after his smart acquaintance of Piccadilly days, while that gentleman lurked in a third-class carriage, choke full of natives.

Rayner decided that the only thing left for him to do was to secrete himself in the grimy corner which he had longed to leave, till he could guarantee that his friend's back was turned. When that moment arrived he jumped with alacrity to the platform and hurried to report himself.

"Ah, here you are, Rayner—thought you were going to cheat us too! My wife and I are awfully sorry Mrs. Rayner's heart failed her at the last moment. Carrie has been making great moan about her disappointment since your letter came. Stupid of me not to have caught sight of you before! I thought I searched every carriage!"

"Oh, I think I was at the far end. But here I am, precious glad to be out of that beastly train."

"Sorry you haven't been comfortable. Carrie and I thought we were in the lap of luxury on our trip to Bombay. We thought the carriages most grand and comfortable, but you always were a fastidious chap, Rayner! I only hope you'll deign to be satisfied with our humble abode. I warn you it's up two pairs of stairs, good enough rooms when one reaches them, that of course is a necessity out here. But I hope before long we may be able to transfer ourselves to a house with a compound," said the young husband, with a cheerful smile.

"Doing a roaring trade, no doubt, Melford? Wish I'd gone in for being a merchant. Law is poor pay and no pudding!"

"Not in your case evidently, Rayner. Tresham was telling me what a palatial residence you have in Madras, and what fine entertainments you give—and of your equipages galore. Our one buggy is all we've been able to muster as yet. But I'm saving up for an evening carriage for Carrie. I think I may see my way to that before the hot weather fairly sets in. But you and Mrs. Rayner will be taking flight to the Neilgherries soon, I suppose?"

"Yes, Ooty will see us before long no doubt. My wife is feeling the heat badly already. Her English roses that Madras has raved about all the season are vanishing."

"Oh, yes, I heard about those said roses from Tresham. He reported that Mrs. Rayner is quite the prettiest woman in Madras, and charming besides. You can imagine how eager Carrie and I were to see her, and what a disappointment your wire and then your letter was!"

"Yes, I couldn't give details in my wire, but the fact is my wife is devoted to a certain Mrs. Fellowes, the wife of Colonel Fellowes who commands the Native Infantry Battalion in Madras just now. There's nothing she loves so much as a visit to those people. She helps Mrs. Fellowes with girls' meetings and things of that sort."

"Oh, does she! That would have been another bond with my wife. She has got involved in good works, visits the Zenanas, and does what she can——"

"Thankless business, I say, but it serves to keep our ladies out of mischief, perhaps," said Rayner, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The gharry had now reached Ballygunge Road and drew up before the wide entrance door of the Melford's flat.

"Think of being condemned to climb those horrid stairs when one comes home dead beat!" muttered Mr. Rayner to himself, as he followed his host up the long flight of steps.

The home of the Melfords, when reached, however, appeared, even to his fastidious eyes, ample and even elegant. Its young mistress, though without Hester's grace and beauty, was a sweet comely young matron with the glow of health and happiness in her eyes. Her guest could discern that her expression of regret over his wife's absence was genuine. A twinge of remorse visited him when he recalled his action in the matter, and it was quickened by the recollection of the discreditable record of his days in Bombay. He winced to think of the follies for which he had bartered his wife's chance of a pleasant holiday with this kind host and hostess, and resolved that he would proceed with all haste to make the most of his opportunities with Truelove Brothers, and try to secure a larger share of their profits so that he might have more luxury to shower upon her.

On confiding his hopes and plans to his host over a cheroot after dinner, he was assured by him that the firm in question was an excellent one.

"As sound as the Bank, by Jove! I think I'll leave the Madras High Court and become a merchant!" exclaimed Mr. Rayner, his eyes dancing with pleasure as he listened to the praise of Messrs. Truelove.

"I wonder you never thought of that open door before, Rayner," said Mr. Melford between the puffs of his pipe.

"Be you sure I did. But that I should be a Madras barrister seemed the goal of my aunt's ambition. She brought me up, you know. I fell into the trap, being young and foolish; moreover, she always assured me that the reigning partner, Mr. Fyson, was as hard as a nail, and that he would never give me a bite of the plum."

"I've always thought Fyson a very good sort—straight man to deal with," remarked Melford musingly.

"Well, I shall have an opportunity of testing him to-morrow. I'm rather looking forward to it," returned Rayner, brushing the ash from his cheroot.

"So you're bent on business at once? I thought you might have come to my office first, and then Carrie has a project for the afternoon—an invitation to go up the Hoogly in a steam launch with friends. She accepted for you, thinking you would enjoy it. I may manage to get off for the afternoon too, and make one of the party. You're sure to enjoy a trip on the river, Rayner."

"Yes, but business must come before pleasure! I certainly hope to do the Calcutta sights later but Truelove Brothers call me first. But I won't be the whole day with them. I hope I may be able to join the pleasure trip in the afternoon."

"Of course you will! You can meet me at my office and we'll drive home to tiffin together. My place isn't far from Truelove's. A tikka-gharry will fetch you. You look a bit tired, Rayner! Suppose we turn in? Carrie and I keep early hours."

"Thanks, I shan't object! I want to be fresh to-morrow. I say, Melford, if I present a good front don't you think they may be so enamoured of me that they will conclude the bargain at once, and the indenture of partnership go forward without a hitch?"

"Not such an easy matter, Rayner," replied his host, shaking his head. He being chief assistant in a good mercantile firm hoped one day if fortune favoured him to become a small partner, but he knew too well the obstacles to be overcome to be able to assure his friend of a speedy success. He acknowledged that Rayner's close relationship with the well-known firm put him on a favourable footing; and certainly Alfred Rayner had an assertive air, the humble man meekly acknowledged, which sometimes spelt success.

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. RAYNER and his hostess had quite made friends when they parted next morning, he to accompany her husband to his office. He assured Mrs. Melford that he would not fail to return to tiffin, and also to avail himself of the pleasure of a sail up the Hoogly. Seated in his host's gharry as they rattled along the bustling streets, Rayner contrasted it with the leisurely ongoings of the Mount Road in Madras, and the comparison seemed to him all in favour of the Europeanised city.

"Why, one seems to live and move and be here, Melford!" he exclaimed. "This place suits me down to the ground. I declare, I think I shall make a bid for a share of Truelove Brothers' lacs without delay!"

The gharry now drew up in front of a handsome block of buildings to which Mr. Melford introduced him as his employers' premises, and, alighting, he arranged to meet him again at Ballygunge Road, whither he intended to return when his call was over. "You'll easily pick up a tikka-gharry at Truelove's. They're as thick as flies there about," his host assured him as they parted.

The quarters of the old merchants' firm looked more ancient and dull than that of Melford's employers, but they had a dignified air of respectability which was quite in keeping with the best traditions of such offices.

Rayner handed his card to one of the *durwans* in attendance in the marble-paved hall around which were many doors marked with the names of the occupants of the chambers. From one of these the *durwan* emerged now and requested the visitor to follow him He led him into a smaller hall from which a staircase led to the upper rooms; and into one of these, a large lofty apartment, Mr. Rayner was ushered.

A tall, middle-aged man with a kindly, sagacious face was pacing up and down dictating to a Eurasian clerk who sat at the table. He paused in his walk, bowing to his visitor as he said: " How do you do, sir! "

Rayner noticed that a pair of shrewd eyes were fixed upon him with a quiet, scrutinising glance.

" Ha, he don't half like this chip of the old block coming to claim his own," he said to himself as he returned the bow with a broad smile. " Sorry to disturb you on a busy morning, sir. I've just remembered that this is our English mail day," he began, as the clerk began to gather his papers to retire.

" Oh, as to that we're always pretty well up to time here," returned the other, motioning his visitor to the seat which the clerk had just vacated, and taking a chair opposite him.

" Well, I suppose I'd better come to the point at once," began Mr. Rayner briskly. " The fact is I've taken this run to Calcutta to see my birthplace, and I thought I might use the opportunity to call on the present representative of Truelove Brothers. I believe you are now the senior partner of the firm? "

" I am," said Mr. Fyson laconically.

" Well, naturally sentimental reasons prompted me to wish to see the inside of the business house where my father was a partner."

Mr. Fyson raised his eyebrows but made no response.

" I speak of David Rayner. Of course you are aware that I am his son? "

" There was never a David Rayner partner in this firm, but I believe a John Rayner once held some office here."

" My uncle, of course."

" Your uncle, was he? I never saw Mr. John Rayner. He had left before my time; but he held only a subordinate place in the firm. I could tell you what it was by looking up records."

"It's of no account! Then, sir, if you were not in the firm at that time you may not be aware of the fact that my father, David Rayner, was a partner."

Mr. Fyson shook his head negatively, and the young man continued in a louder voice:

"Pray, why else does your firm supply me with an allowance?—has done so for years—since I was a child of four, sent at my father's death to England with my aunt, Mrs. John Rayner."

"Your father's death!" repeated Mr. Fyson; and Alfred Rayner felt certain that his voice faltered when he uttered these words.

"Ha, there's some villainy here—the old story I expect of an orphan defrauded of his rights," thought Rayner, but he resolved to be nothing if not practical, and bending forward with a facetious smile, he said in a tone of well-simulated frankness: "Well, I'll be open with you, Mr. Fyson. The fact is I came to see whether the firm can allow me a bigger share of the profits than I've been drawing. I'll even consent to let bygones be bygones if you'll deal straight with me at last. I'm a man now and a lawyer to boot, and you'll not make me believe that the only son of an old partner of the firm has not a right to a bigger slice of the profits of this prosperous house than the paltry sums I've been having."

As he spoke he felt as if he were placing an ultimatum in the hands of a trapped man on whose face he now fixed his eyes, saying to himself: "He's fairly caught now, and if I can get gold enough to pull me through my present involvements I'll defer my claim for a time."

He continued to watch Mr. Fyson, who preserved silence for some moments, his face wearing a perplexed air. Passing his hand across his forehead, his lips parted as if he were going to speak, then he closed them again, appearing still in doubt as to what his answer should be. At length he said very slowly:

"Your plea for a larger allowance is unfortunately flanked by more than one fallacy. I am really at a loss to know where to disentangle these." He cleared his throat and went on : " For the second time I must tell you that no such person as David Rayner ever existed in this firm, either as partner or underling. Second, that the allowance which you receive is not from the profits of this firm but from a private source. In fact, you are not as you suppose the fatherless son of any old partner of Truelove Brothers."

" My allowance not from this firm ! " cried Rayner in open-mouthed astonishment. " Do I not receive half yearly from your house the sum of five thousand rupees ? "

" It is true that the money does pass through our hands—more I am not at liberty to disclose," said Mr. Fyson firmly.

" A plot, I declare ! " cried the young man with flashing eyes. " Not at liberty to disclose where my income is derived from ? Why, you forget that you are not addressing a child, but a member of the Madras bar and a sharp one too ! " His temper visibly rose as he spoke.

Mr. Fyson's keen face twitched uneasily. He patted the crisp papers which lay on his writing table and lowered his eyes as if to seek counsel in a dilemma. Then, fixing his keen grey orbs on his visitor, he looked at him steadily as if to take stock of him more fully. He then seemed to decide on his course of action, and began to speak in a matter of fact tone :

" You mention your allowance—I should tell you that I have before me your recent application for an increase——"

" That won't satisfy me now ! I want my rights," broke in Rayner sulkily.

" Will you allow me to finish what I have to say without interruption ? " There was a severe note in the senior partner's voice which acted as a check. " I was about to write to you on the subject. My reply was to be that your allowance will be increased on one condition only, that you will give a pledge, —for the keeping of which due means will be taken—namely, that you will give up all betting, card-playing for money, gambling in any form. If you agree to this I think I can venture to say—in fact I am authorised to state that your allowance will be doubled” ; and again Mr. Fyson patted his papers.

As he listened to the calm, even tones, Alfred Rayner's face darkened to a scowl which seemed to transform the smiling young fellow, who had walked into Mr. Fyson's room a few minutes before, into an evil spirit.

“ I never heard a more insulting proposal from one man to another ! ” he exclaimed in a choking voice. “ Do you take me for a kid you can tie to the leg of a table, that you are trying this impertinence on me ? I tell you I won't stand it for a moment ! I'll have a case filed against you.”

The older man passed his fingers through his whitening hair and shook his head in evident perplexity.

“ Come now, be reasonable,” he began. “ If these are the only terms on which you can double your allowance—and you admit that you are in need of money—don't you think you would be a wise man to close with them, now and here, and end this interview ? ” added Mr. Fyson, rising from his chair with an air of decision. His conciliatory tone was however misinterpreted by the younger man, who sprang from his chair with clenched hands.

“ You think to wheedle me, I see, but it won't do ! I'll expose you, I'll put the matter into legal hands here where you are known, and I hope it will ruin you. I'll have my rights I tell you—whatever it costs me,” he added, coming a step nearer and looking with threatening eyes at the tall, impassive figure.

“ To what matter do you refer ? To what rights, pray ? ” asked Mr. Fyson calmly, putting his hands in his pockets.

“ As my father's heir I have a right to his estate. Don't you mistake, I'll be even with Messrs. Truelove

Brothers yet"; and Mr. Rayner took a step towards the door.

"One moment," said Mr. Fyson, taking his right hand from his pocket. "I want to repeat again that we are not your trustees, Mr.——" Here Mr. Fyson paused as if the surname had escaped his memory.

"Rayner," supplied the other.

"Ah, no—a better name!" murmured Mr. Fyson as he looked at the young man, and a curious smile played about his lips.

"Do you mean to give me the lie when I tell you my own name? This is insupportable! Perhaps you think I'm an impostor? Yet do you not address—or cause to be addressed—all the remittances that come from this house to Alfred Rayner?" he asked, with a strong effort at calmness.

"I do—though with reluctance," replied Mr. Fyson slowly. "You have driven me into a corner, young man! I feel that I owe it in loyalty to the good man who is your father to tell you that he lives still, and to tell you that the name he was induced—wrongly in my opinion—to consent to your bearing is not his"; and with a troubled air Mr. Fyson sat down again at his writing table and glanced at his papers.

"You lie, you lie!" screamed Alfred Rayner with almost feminine shrillness. His passion choked him for a moment, then, with an effort at calmness, though he was still trembling all over, he called out: "Proof—I ask for proof, definite—immediate—of this astounding statement!"

"Fain would I give you the proof you seek if it lay with me, but loyalty to one of the best of men keeps me silent! But it appears to me that the hour has struck for a different course of action from that which has hitherto been maintained," said Mr. Fyson, with a stern light coming into his eyes. "You have need to be disabused of some of your—hallucinations, shall I call them? I hope permission may be given me to let you know the truth. I am sorry for your sake it has been so long withheld. I shall communicate with you in due course. Meanwhile, I should like to call your attention again to the offer your good father has made. Will you agree to his terms? I have his commands to double your allowance if you will only cease from vices which he holds—and rightly—to be soul-ruining. Now, sir, I desire to bring this interview to a close," said Mr. Fyson, again rising, though his visitor still stood as if riveted to the spot.

The older man straightening himself put his hands in his pockets and bowed stiffly, then with a softened air he added:

"I would fain believe all good of you as your father's son. I hope it will be given to you to know him one day—and to know him will be to respect him as I have done for years."

Somehow, as these words fell on his ear, Rayner seemed to move mechanically to the door, and stood outside it as if in a dream. He made a gesture as if he would re-enter, but appeared to decide against the step. Clinging to the old banisters he walked slowly downstairs, and crossed the marble-floored hall, the soft-footed *durwan* opening the door for him noiselessly, he passed out to the busy street.

He walked a few paces with unsteady tread, forgetting that he meant to hire a carriage. The noonday sun was beating fiercely on his head, but in the tumult of his thoughts he did not heed it. His first sense of being completely foiled in his mission with Truelove Brothers was presently succeeded by a suggestion of a different kind.

"Why, this unknown pater of mine is evidently an important personage! He may turn out to be some big official—Lieutenant-Governor of a province or the like! The old merchant spoke of him with bated breath. What an idiot I am to be weighted down by a sense of failure! I've actually scored this morning after all. The old fool very nearly let the cat out of the bag though! If I had only hung about a moment longer I might have heard all. But I'll worm out the secret yet. A double allowance if I turn Methody! Ha, ha! Why, lacs of rupees are more likely my rightful portion!"

Remembering his promise to return to Ballygunge Road to tiffin, he decided to call a tikka-gharry, and was stepping into it when he was accosted by a young man with a cringing air whom he at once recognised as Mr. Fyson's Eurasian clerk.

"Beg pardon, sir, but a word with you for your own advantage!" he said, making salaams.

"Well, out with it! I'm in a hurry," said Mr. Rayner in an impatient tone.

"You see, sir, it's like this," began the man, putting his head to one side. "I couldn't help hearing your talk through the door. You and the master both havin' a kind of carryin' voice—not as I heard all your talk—but you want to know who your father is? Well, I can let you into thatt secret," he added, with a nod and a wink.

"And pray what do you know about it?" asked Rayner coldly. "How can I believe a word that you say when you stand a convicted eavesdropper?"

"Oh, sir, don't say thatt," said the young man, glancing furtively round, his hands clinging to the window of the gharry. "But, look here, sir, if you'll trust me I'll give you his name and proof positive into the bargain. Can't do it now, I see a fellow from Truelove's comin' along, and suspicion might be raised if you and me is caught hobnobbin'. They're terrible strict at our place."

"Well, where can we meet?" asked Rayner, seeing the difficulty of prolonging the present interview. "I'm a stranger to the town. I could come to your house this evening if you give me your address—that is to say if you've got anything worth telling me."

"Oh, sir, my house is too humble for a grand gent like you to come to," returned the clerk, shaking his head.

" Where then, quick, don't you humbug me a moment longer. Drive on, gharry-wallah," he shouted to the coachman, " I'm sick of this nonsense."

" One moment," pleaded the other, making a sign to the driver, and putting his head in at the window of the gharry. " What price if I tell you the secret and prove it ? "

" A ten rupee note will be ample payment," returned Rayner.

" A ten-rupee note," echoed the clerk, withdrawing his head, then he thrust it in again. " Look here, sir, if you'll meet me at the Shrine of Kali at seven o'clock to-night—any gharry-wallah will drive you to that place, it ain't more than a mile off—I'll tell you what you want to know and prove it, but not for one pie less than one hundred rupees. I don't sell Truelove's best secret for naught," he added, with a cunning leer.

" All right, I'll consider," said Rayner.

The gharry-wallah waved his whip and began to thread his way along the crowded thoroughfare.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON the same day as Alfred Rayner made his call on Truelove Brothers, Mrs. Fellowes, with Hester seated by her side, was driving in her little victoria towards Vepery. They had made a slight *détour* by the lines of the Native Infantry, which was some distance from the residential quarter, and had now left behind the quiet corner with the officers' bungalows and reached the First Line Beach.

"I always like this bit," remarked Mrs. Fellowes. "Somehow it reminds me of one of the quays of Newcastle where I used to visit a dear friend when I was a girl. I suppose all busy seaport places have a family likeness. This suggests to me one of the vanished haunts of my girlhood, and has always made this First Line Beach pleasant to me."

Hester led her friend to share with her the pleasant reminiscences of the past, and their talk flowed on till the sight of the polo match in progress on the green island proved a distraction. The spectacle was being watched by crowds of spectators from the well-filled grand stand, and at the palings the natives clustered, scanning the feats of the agile riders with shrill delight.

The ladies in the victoria did not halt long in the neighbourhood of the island. Their destination was further inland, to the crowded quarter of Vepery.

"When I told the Colonel that you and I were going to make an impromptu call on Mr. Morpeth, he said it was rather unfair," said Mrs. Fellowes. "That, being a bachelor, we should have given him warning."

"Mr. Morpeth looks so calm and detached—almost like a fakir, I don't think anything could take him by surprise," returned Hester with a smile. "Anyhow I'm going to make my visit at last. I have long wanted to see Mr. Morpeth at home, and you know he did invite us to come any afternoon. I don't think he'll mind our going without warning. You see, we never have any time left the day we are at the Girls' Club."

"I'm sure he won't mind," agreed Mrs. Fellowes. "It's only Joe's red-tape fussiness. I once took Mrs. Campbell of Puranapore to call on him when she was staying with us, and his reception of us was charming. But I really don't think there is anything of the fakir in Mr. Morpeth. It always strikes me what a delightful family man he would have made, but instead he has opened his heart to his poor despised race and lives for them. But I've been thinking he has been looking more lonely and sad lately. He has a sorrowful preoccupied air he didn't have when we first knew him. Ah, here we are at Freyville!"

"What a neat, home-like gate!" exclaimed Hester. "I haven't seen anything so tidy since I left Pinkthorpe. How carefully tended his garden looks! How can he manage it? Our compound at Clive's Road was looking quite brown and withered even before I left it."

She looked round with admiration on the well-kept borders, carefully trimmed shrubs and hedges, and the well-watered flowers.

"It's all of a piece—outside and in," said Mrs. Fellowes. "The fact is, my dear, we are too much birds of passage to do justice to our homes here. They are merely camps to us, but to these sons of the soil they are real homes; and that's what Mr. Morpeth wants to make them for his poorer brethren of the Eurasian community, who are too often contented to crowd together in the most miserable sheds. Then Mr. Morpeth gets much better service than we can. His staff is not scattered to the winds every few years like ours. The residents are able to have their retainers growing grey in their service, and they become as perfect as the servants of the best, and fast dying out type, at home. Here comes one of these now! Well, Mootoo, is your master at home?"

"He is, ma'am, and very pleased will he be to see you," said the man, showing his white teeth as he salaamed. One could see from under the edge of his artistically-folded turban, a suspicion of grey hair. His snow white tunic fell in graceful folds about his tall figure as he noiselessly led the way to introduce the visitors.

"This hall is my envy," said Mrs. Fellowes. "It is all paved in real marble. Some of those older Madras houses are so. I do love those black and white chequers. What a poor substitute our rattan matting is, or even when the chequers are copied in chunam."

As they lingered to admire some of the massive hand-made furnishings of the hall they heard the sound of voices.

"Oh, what a pity, he has company to-day! I should have preferred a nice talk with him all by ourselves," whispered Mrs. Fellowes.

"Only one company, Missus," said Mootoo, smiling, having overheard her remark as he prepared to announce them.

Mr. Morpeth, of whom they first caught sight, was bending forward in his easy-chair with an air of interest listening to the conversation of his visitor, Mark Cheveril.

"Ah, good! A meeting of friends!" exclaimed the old man in a gleeful tone. "This is what Mootoo would call a lucky day for me!"

"For me too," said Mark, as he shook hands with the ladies, a happy light coming into his frank eyes. "And it follows on a disappointment, too. I've just been to Clive's Road on my way from the station to find its mistress absent."

"Now, Mr. Cheveril," broke in Mrs. Fellowes, "if you had only had the intuition to drive on to Royapooram you would have found the absent bird there."

"I did think of it, for the boy volunteered the information that Mr. Rayner was in Calcutta and 'Missus done gone to Royapooram,'" returned Mark. He glanced now at Hester with keen eyes, and was satisfied to note that she was looking better and happier than when he had last seen her.

"But if he had made that round, Mrs. Fellowes, where should I have come in?" asked Mr. Morpeth. "The fact is I look upon him as my peculiar property for the day, seeing I lured him all the way from Puranapore to open our new Reading-room for our young men. Wasn't that a good move, Mrs. Fellowes?"

"Excellent—I am glad! And if I didn't know that you eschewed females on these occasions, I should suggest that we should come to hear Mr. Cheveril's speech, shouldn't you, Hester?"

"Indeed I should! But mayn't we, Mr. Morpeth?" asked Hester, her winning smile evoking a return one from the old man. "You are master of ceremonies, are you not?"

"It wouldn't do, believe me," replied Mr. Morpeth, shaking his head. "Our masculine efforts would have no chance. The lads would be too much fascinated by the unwonted presence of English ladies."

"Singular number, please, Mr. Morpeth," said Mrs. Fellowes promptly. "I don't think an old body like me would distract them. But I suppose he knows best, Hester, we must give in. He is very impartial, you see, he won't come to our Girls' Friendly. We must accept the scruples of an expert."

Mootoo was now bringing in tea, which was daintily served on a richly carved old silver tray. The cups and saucers being of old Chelsea china, while the lovely Cutch work silver service belonged to the more artistic period of that style.

"Every time I come here I ask the same question like a regular Mrs. Gamp," laughed Mrs. Fellowes.

" Where do you get this delicious blend of tea ? It's the most refreshing cup I ever get anywhere," and she sipped the fragrant beverage from the delicate Chelsea cup. " And those scones, aren't they perfect, Mr. Cheveril ? Never did I taste their like except in the Highlands of Scotland ! "

Mootoo, who was serving, showed his keen gratification by a quiver of his eyelids, these scones being his special triumph, for Mootoo could cook excellently as well as do " butler " work, and with juggler-like rapidity had turned out the scones and cakes which Mrs. Fellowes declared would bring down reproaches upon her from her husband when he observed she had no appetite left for dinner.

Tea being over, the older lady suggested that their host should allow them to see some of the interesting things with which his house abounded, and declared she would lead the prowl. Mark had already made the acquaintance of some of these treasures.

" I was just saying to Mr. Morpeth," he remarked, " that in this Indian house he had carried out the chief function of an old country mansion at home—that of being the receptacle for storing things one cannot carry about with one in a roving life."

" Yes, that's what the Colonel's always lamenting," broke in Mrs. Fellowes. " There can be no relic-gathering in the Anglo-Indian's lot. And after all, these possessions are the making of a family—collections of old letters, heirloom portraits, mementos of persons and events—why, one can't keep anything of the kind in India ! I once had a lock of Prince Charlie's yellow hair—purported to be so, anyhow—among my treasures. The *poochees* ate it in one week ! No, all that sacred storing of precious things is denied to us poor wanderers over the great restless ocean," wound up Mrs. Fellowes sadly.

The delightful shelves of books seemed to be calling Hester's attention, and Mark Cheveril was in his element introducing her to some of his old favourites of which she had only heard from him. Presently Mr. Morpeth was called to the verandah to see two young men who had come in to consult him about some final arrangements for the coming meeting, and Mrs. Fellowes went to converse with the parrot, who always claimed her attention on her visits to Freyville.

Mark and Hester, continuing their explorations, came upon a shelf among the rows of books which seemed to be given up to miniatures and daguerrotypes. One of these was the portrait of a young man with a rarely beautiful face which caught Hester's eye.

"I feel sure this is a portrait of Mr. Morpeth when he was young," she remarked, after scanning it.

"If so he has sadly changed," returned Mark, as he looked at the young spirited face with bright, dauntless-looking eyes, and compared them with the sad, meditative grey orbs into which he had been looking before the ladies joined them.

"And this, I suppose, must be his sister! She looks too young for his mother. Pretty face, isn't it?" said Hester, handing Mark another old daguerrotype in its leathern case.

"Superficially pretty, perhaps," returned Mark. "No, I don't admire the face," he added, and was about to replace it on the shelf without further comment, when Hester said:

"Let me see it again! It reminds me curiously of some girl—I think—I've seen either here or at home. Those eyes look familiar and the shape of that nose—I know who it's like. It has a look of my husband! How odd! I'm sure he isn't girlish-looking," she added with a laugh.

Mark took the portrait into his hand again and examined it attentively. "Yes, perhaps there is a likeness—about the eyes especially."

He was still looking at it when they were joined by Mrs. Fellowes and Mr. Morpeth.

"Ah, you are looking at my little gallery of old portraits," he said. "I fear they are not very artistic

But I've got some portfolios of old engravings that are worth looking at. I have them carefully stowed away, one can't leave such things about. The monsoon makes such havoc on all pictures—even under glass, not to speak of the insects."

"Is this a relative of yours, Morpeth?" asked Mark, holding out the old daguerrotype. "Your sister, perhaps!"

"No, not my sister, alas, I never had one! That is my late wife."

"Your wife!" exclaimed Mrs. Fellowes, coming forward to look at the picture. "Forgive my accent of surprise, dear friend, but do you know neither the Colonel nor I ever knew you were married. We have always set you down as a bachelor!"

"Well, I have been so for many a long day. My wife died a year after we were married," he added, a pained look crossing his face.

Mrs. Fellowes, after a close survey of the portrait, replaced it on the shelf, saying to herself as she did so:

"Wouldn't have been much of a companion to the dear man if she had lived, if I can read faces!"

Hester, seeing the look of sadness in Mr. Morpeth's eyes, hastened to make some digression, and turned to admire an exquisitely carved ivory box which stood on the same shelf as the portraits.

"This is beautiful workmanship, Mr. Morpeth. I am specially interested because I have a box rather like it which I greatly admired, and still do, though I can see now the great superiority of yours. My husband presented me with mine when we were engaged to be married. Of course, he believed it to be the finest ivory, so his disappointment was great when an expert, to whom he was showing it lately, pronounced it to be only bone! I assured Alfred I thought it was just as beautiful as before, but he's never been able to look on it with favour since. I confess I can see, on examining yours, the difference between the true and the false."

"Yes, I can vouch for this one," replied Mr. Morpeth, "that it is at least genuine, for I gave the man the bit of ivory out of which it is carved. It's years ago now. The man was a poor worker who had lost both his legs, but his hands stood him in good stead. He was the most perfect ivory-carver I've ever seen. He was a bit of a genius in other ways too. His designs were often original. If you examine this box closely you will see there is a whole history carved on its top and sides. He became a Christian and loved gospel themes, and these are some scenes from the life of Our Lord. See, here He sits with Mary at His feet listening to His words, and there He is walking on the sea. Aren't those billows wonderful—carved out of such a hard material as ivory?"

But now Mrs. Fellowes remarked that though they had only made a beginning in their examination of his treasures, they must really set out for home, or the Colonel would begin to get anxious about them. She turned to Mark to try to persuade him to give them some hours before he left for Puranapore on the following day, but he said he must return in the early morning as some matters were requiring his attention at the Revenue Office, and that the Collector and he were to start on tour the day following.

Mrs. Fellowes and her guest said good-bye, and were already seated in the victoria when Mr. Morpeth came round to the side of the carriage at which Hester sat, and laid a little parcel in her hand.

"It's only the ivory box! Will you accept it as a little memento of your first visit to a lonely old man? Let this replace the false one. Use it freely—keep your mother's letters in it. I got the secret of restoring stained ivory from the carver, and I'll share it with you when the little box needs a cleaning."

"Oh, but really I cannot deprive you of this priceless treasure," cried Hester, with a genuinely troubled air "No, it must not go from your keeping!"

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"If it goes to yours it will please me more than you can guess," returned Mr. Morpeth, his pathetic grey eyes pleading more than his words.

"Then I shall keep the little box with its beautiful carved histories as my best treasure as long as I live," said Hester, her eyes glistening with tears as she clasped the packet in both hands and looked into the donor's face.

The two gentlemen stood bareheaded in the sunset glow to watch them drive off, the turbaned Mootoo behind them, framed by the graceful festooning creepers of the verandah, while the parrot called from its perch: "Come back soon, master lonely!"

"Very pat for once, Polly," said Mr. Morpeth with a smile, as he scratched the bird's neck; while Mark stood with folded arms and earnest eyes watching the disappearing carriage.

"I shall never forget the picture those two made standing there," said Hester, looking back towards the verandah. "Those sad eyes of the old man wring my heart. How good it is that Mark seems to love him like a son."

"Yes, my dear, we've had a very pleasant visit, though it was impromptu. We'll be able to tell the Colonel how well it turned out."

CHAPTER XXVII.

As Alfred Rayner was being driven along the crowded streets of Calcutta after his call on Truelove Brothers, he felt less inclined than ever for a pleasure trip on the river, or even for a return to tiffin with his host and hostess. He decided that he must find a safety-valve for his disturbed state of mind, and presently he caught sight of a gaudy sign announcing: " Tiffin and Billiards within." The place looked large and airy, and he saw some figures like European gentlemen moving about within.

" I'll tiff here more comfortably than with those worthy Melfords," he said to himself, and called to the gharry-wallah to halt. He paid his fare, dismissed him, and entered the wide doorway.

During lunch he made the acquaintance of some of the *habitués* of the Club, who appeared eager to receive him, and invited him to share their game. Being an excellent billiard player, he congratulated himself as the afternoon advanced on having had a good stroke of fortune in stumbling into this resort.

" I've positively made enough to pay that crawling half-caste if I do make up my mind to buy his secret. Perhaps I'd better take the hazard of the die! It may prove well spent money. I'm convinced I'll hear my secretive pater is a *grand seigneur*, possibly lounging about Piccadilly at this moment while his son is grilling here! I could read in old Fyson's manner, as well as in his words, that my dad was 'somebody,' and if I have the secret from his clerk, I shan't have him to thank for the present of it. Yes, as I've made the required sum I will go and buy it from that creature whose long ears have stood him in good stead."

He glanced at his watch and found that it was now nearly the appointed hour for the meeting at the Shrine of Kali. Having taken the measure of the men round him, he knew well that they were reckoning on getting his winnings transferred to their own pockets before the evening was over. To announce therefore his intention to depart would prove worse than foolish. Seizing a moment when he found himself near the door, he flung aside his cue and hurried off with such suddenness that the other inmates of the room did not realise he was gone.

"Very neatly played," he muttered with a relieved sigh, as he leant back in the tikka-gharry which was carrying him along the brightly-lit streets to the appointed trysting-place.

Presently the paving-stones were left behind, and the gharry rattled along a soft dusty roadway lined by trees, though the presence of lamps indicated that they were still in the suburbs. At last the gharry-wallah pulled up at the precincts of the little sandstone temple embowered by trees. Long dank grass of a marshy kind grew all round, the temple being in the near neighbourhood of a small river which ran into the Hoogly. This river was regarded as sacred, and therefore the little shrine had been planted on its banks.

Under the shadow of a big neem tree Mr. Rayner caught sight of the Eurasian clerk, who now came towards him through the long grass with rapid steps.

"Thought you were never coming, sir," he began. "I've been hangin' about this blessed place for more than an hour. I was makin' up my mind you was goin' to give me the slip!"

He was holding some papers in his hand and his eyes shone with excitement. Mr. Rayner dismissed the gharry, and advanced a few steps into the grass, saying impatiently:

"Well, out with it! Mind, if you humbug me, I'll find means to pay you out in something different from a bag of rupees. But for good value I'll pay you a good price. I know my father must be a person of importance, or Truelove Brothers wouldn't have been so deferential to me all along."

"You're right, sir, he is a person of veree great importance. What's more, I've seen him with my own eyes and heard 'em whisperin'—the boss and him about you—'Alfred' bein' your name. So you see I know more than you might think to look at me."

"You'd need to!" said Rayner contemptuously, as he surveyed the bent shoulders and the weak face of this humble member of the race he despised. "Come on then, out with it! I can't stand all night listening to your haverings. His name and his address!"

"His name is an honoured one among us. It's David Morpeth, sir, and his address is Freyville, Vepery, Madras!"

"You lie—you lie!" shouted Rayner, after a moment's stunned silence, waxing so deadly pale that the clerk thought he was about to faint. Then suddenly he flung himself on the young man and seized him by the throat. "You lie, say you lie!" he screamed.

The youth strove frantically to shake himself free from the grasp of the convulsive fingers, and after a struggle succeeded in doing so.

"Oh my gracious me!" he gasped. Oh, my, what an onset—and for my prime bit of news too, as I thought you'd be proud to hear—you the son of such a man!"

"Listen to me, you idiot," said Rayner in a choking voice, with an effort to calm himself. "There must be some mistake! This is not the truth you have told me. Say that you've lied and I'll forgive you—you'll have your hundred rupees. I've got it here—say you've been lying!"

"I can't say no different than what I've stated," said the clerk, shaking his head dolorously. "I've got you the proofs in my hand. Though they be pilfered they're genuine, as you, being a man of education, will see at a glance."

He laid two letters into Rayner's hand. The writing could hardly be distinguished in the dim light, but on his going under one of the lamps he could read the words which David Morpeth had lately written to Mr. Fyson concerning his son. One recorded the offer of the double allowance "if my son, Alfred Rayner, will agree to abandon his betting and gambling habits and turn to better ways." It bore so obviously the impress of genuineness that even Alfred Rayner could no longer doubt the truth of the, to him, appalling revelation.

"You see it was like this," said the clerk, in an explanatory tone, setting his head on one side. "Mr. Morpeth's wife—your mother, was, as I've heard, a great toast in Chandrychoke, though one would not have said, according to my mother, that she was a match for him—Mr. Morpeth, I mean—his family belonging to Duramtollah, where the upper classes of us Eurasians live. But he wedded her all the same, and she worrited him a good bit with her high-flown ideas and her temper and all, being a trifle light. He was always a quiet gentleman, they say. When you was born and she lay a-dying, she made him pledge himself to give you up to her sister Flo who was wed on a Mister Rayner. He once held the same post as myself in Trueloves', but he made his pile somehow and went to England to swagger and spend."

The man was so taken up with his narration that he forgot he was speaking to the relative of these people. At the mention of his aunt's name, Rayner squirmed. Cruel searching daylight was stealing into his mind. Forgotten things were being brought to memory. He covered his face and leant against a tree, groaning. But the clerk, with a ring of indignation in his *chi-chi* voice, proceeded:

"And you, forsooth, were never even to be told about your father and was to carry the name of Rayner—

a name a deal sight lower than Morpeth. I can show you the very house you was born in and where you was bred till you was took to England. It's not far from this veree spot. Your aunt said as how she would live no longer in half-caste holes, though she was a good bit darker than me, if you'll remember. And Mr. Morpeth, he took a bungalow for them, and they lived there like fighting-cocks till they took you away across the black water. Being a kid, maybe you'll not mind, but there's more than one in Chandrychoke, including my mother, that minds well. So why you're squealin' and fightin' with me for tellin' the veree facts, I can't see," he wound up querulously, as he tried to peer into Rayner's face which was now turned towards him, appearing ghastly white, his eyes staring vacantly.

Some moments elapsed, and as Rayner still did not speak, the youth began to get impatient, and moreover, longed for his supper.

"I'll be steppin' townwards now, sir," he said timidly, keeping his eyes fixed on the rigid face. Mechanically Alfred Rayner drew from his small travelling satchel the bag of rupees, and held it out to the clerk, whose long thin fingers closed upon it. Without waiting to count the money he hurried off across the grass, never halting till he was well clear of the Shrine of Kali. Then he sat down under one of the oil lamps which skirted the road.

"I wonder if he's given me up to our bargain," he muttered. "Shouldn't wonder if he's divided it by half seeing he took my prime bit of news thatt bad. Oh my gracious me, to think of his turning up his nose 'cause Mr. Morpeth was his father, and him not fit to black his boots, for all his airs and fine clothes! I saw well the boss didn't seem to think much of him. Yes," he added, with a gratified start, after counting the money. "I declare, the hundred rupees is here all right. My gracious, some folks be fools and no mistake!" Then he jumped up and proceeded to walk home with brisk steps.

How long Alfred Rayner stood in the shadow of Kali's Shrine he never could have told, nor would he have wished to recall. Waves of misery seemed to roll over him. For long he could not steady his thoughts, and when he partially succeeded, his fury only grew apace. He saw it all now, he said to himself. From his very birth he had been the cruel sport of an evil fate! How he recognised his Aunt Flo in the touches the clerk had given! Yes, she *was* dark, and used to delight in recounting how she had been a beautiful brunette in her day, though she always dwelt with complacency on his being a fair-skinned boy! He recalled that more than once since his return to India he had been haunted by a subconscious feeling that there might be a strain of the hated half-caste blood in his veins. It was that fear which he had hardly allowed to cross his mind which had proved the origin of his attitude towards the whole class, while to David Morpeth his hatred had amounted to an obsession. Never could he behold the man without a sense of bitter annoyance which he knew full well, had found vent on more than one occasion. He recalled that evening when he had almost trampled on him as he was driving home in his mail-phaeton—and Cheveril's remonstrance. The whole scene sprang vividly into his memory. In his impotent rage he wished the hoofs of his Australians had trampled the life out of him that night. And again when he had crossed his path on the steps of his own house—ah, he remembered it well. It had been the occasion of his first quarrel with Hester.

"Oh, Hester, I had forgotten you!" he groaned. "She's bound to hear this awful disclosure. The secret seems common property. Perhaps she'll turn from me, or worse still, she will take sides with that half-caste, Cheveril. But after all this vile secret may be long in filtering through. My rôle is to put a bold front on it, and hold up my head and pose as heretofore as a pure-bred Englishman. If any rumour reaches my wife's ear I can squash it by persuading her that the whole thing is a slander trumped up by my enemies. But the allowance? I can't, I shan't continue to finger a penny of the money that comes from that man! I'll throw it back in his face, hard up as I am, at least I'll command Truelove Brothers to do so. I'll have no dealings with him. I'll pass him as before. I'll let the hoofs of my horses trample on him if they will. No mawkish sentiment for me! I'm not going to risk my reputation by having it known my father is a half-caste—even if it's true! The whole story may be a lie. I may only be some ward of his, and he swindling me with but a slice of my fortune."

A prey to seething thoughts, almost without knowing it he had started on his homeward walk. At the moment when he clung to the hope that after all he was the victim of some conspiracy and that there was no blood-tie between him and the hated community, he happened to glance up at a bungalow which was now brightly lit by oil lamps. Its circular verandah was ornamented with trellis-work eaves, among which tendrils of a dark glossy creeper intertwined. Suddenly there sprang to his mind the conviction that he had seen that spot long ago. Yes, those trellis-work eaves had looked down upon him when he was a little boy! One day he had gleefully rolled a new bright painted wheelbarrow along that verandah, and the giver of that wheelbarrow, a grave, silent big man with grey eyes, stood by watching him as he played, with a smile on his face—the smile of David Morpeth! Then the little boy had pushed his wheelbarrow down those red steps and run full tilt at the gardener's baby, a little, naked, brown urchin, who stood gazing open-mouthed, and knocked him down, while the air rent with his shrill cries. Then the smile vanished from the face of the big man, and with a stern air he brought his fingers down sharply on the owner of the new wheelbarrow, who in his turn gave an angry yell which brought a half-dressed woman with long black locks falling about her to the verandah. She had folded the boy in her arms, saying shrilly: "What are you doing to my *chota sahib?* You shall not touch my precious one with your big hands."

"I punished him for knocking down the gardener's boy, Flora," answered a grave voice.

"A native brat! What matter of thatt?"

And the grave voice replied: "If you bring the boy up like this, Flora Rayner, he'll turn out a scoundrel." Then the big man turned away with sad, stern eyes—the eyes of David Morpeth!

It was Alfred Rayner's only memory of the past, but it leapt out now, a clear-cut picture, as he stood gazing on the once familiar spot.

"Bah! What have I, an English gentleman bred, to do with such a nightmare," he muttered, shrugging his shoulders, as he walked off with quickened steps. "I'll bury the whole thing fathoms deep."

He did not slacken his pace till the feebly-lit road merged into the bright streets of the city. Seeing the doors of a hotel standing invitingly open, he paused.

"I'm hopelessly late for the Melford's dinner now, I'd better fortify my inner man here," he said to himself, and hurried up the steps. "This mad meeting at the Shrine of Kali has robbed me of my usual appetite. I'll just toss down a glass of brandy to strengthen my nerves before I face that estimable couple."

The stimulant seemed restoring. He passed out to the street again and hailed a tikka-gharry to drive him to Ballygunge Road without further delay.

His host and hostess could not help greeting him with inquiring eyes on his arrival.

"A most discourteous guest I must appear, Mrs. Melford. But pray don't pass sentence on me till you have heard my sad tale," he said lightly. "Well, to begin with, when I emerged from Truelove Brothers

I found that I was hopelessly late for your tiffin, and also for joining the steam-launch party. I refreshed myself as best I could at a place near, and then set out to mow down some calls, seeing that the pleasure of an afternoon on the river was beyond my reach. Then I lost myself, as one may well do in this labyrinth of a place. At last I managed to pick up a gharry and here I am, full of contrition for my bad behaviour. Hope you forgive me, Mrs. Melford ? "

" Oh, but I'm sorry you missed our river picnic. It was so delightful and cool. What a strange day you seem to have had," the hostess added, with a musing air which Mr. Rayner did not relish.

" Didn't Fyson offer you tiffin ? " asked Mr. Melford.

" He did not—most inhospitable, wasn't it ? " said Mr. Rayner quickly, assuming an injured air.

" Strange ! I happen to know that the partners of Trueloves' always have an ample table—covers for anybody who may turn up. In fact they're reckoned most hospitable," said Mr. Melford, deciding that things had evidently not turned out as his guest had expected. Conversation began to flag, then Mr. Rayner remembered that he had letters to attend to.

" No, thanks," he said, declining his host's invitation to the smoking room. " I've indulged in too many exciting cheroots to-day already " ; and with a light laugh he withdrew to his own room.

" Rayner's not in good form to-night," remarked his host.

" Oh, Jack, I can't suffer him ! He's all 'form,' it seems to me. He doesn't look a true man. I'm very sorry for his wife. Is he quite, quite English, do you think ? Did you notice his fingers, and there is surely something oriental in those eyes of his, they're fine, but there's something—I only noticed it since he came in to-night."

" Oh, well, he was born in this country. I have thought once or twice he may have dark blood in him, but dear me, even if he has. There are many excellent Eurasians! Much more sterling characters among them than he seems to be turning out. He used to be a clever, amusing fellow, but it strikes me from what Tresham said he's been spending too much, and that demoralises a man, of course. Perhaps his wife is a butterfly—fond of show!"

"Ah, there you are, the poor wife always gets the blame! Remember Mr. Tresham said she was very charming and good. The same can't be said of her husband, I fear," said Mrs. Melford, looking at her lord and master with a glance of satisfaction.

Next morning Mrs. Melford could not help feeling a sense of relief when her guest announced that he found he must at once return home—that more than one case in the High Court claimed his presence.

That evening Alfred Rayner sailed down the Hoogly carrying his secret with him on his way back to Madras.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

On the morning of his return from Madras, as the train was sweeping into the station at Puranapore, Mark Cheveril noticed among the passengers gathered on the platform for the up train the Mahomedan, Zynool Sahib. He had never exchanged words with him since the morning at the Kutchery, of which he retained an unpleasant recollection. His feeling was evidently reciprocated by the Mussulman, for a scowl was distinctly visible on his ruddy brown face as soon as he caught sight of the Assistant-Collector.

"That man suggests the hatching of evil plots every time I set eyes on him," said Mark to himself, as he watched the heavy form lurching into one of the carriages for Madras. "Fortunately we give each other a wide berth!"

Mark stepped into his waiting bandy and was driven towards the cantonment, as it was still called though bereft of its military element. When about half-way to his bungalow, he perceived, under the shade of a spreading neem tree, two men apparently engaged in earnest conversation. Without difficulty he recognised one of them as Moideen, the Collector's trusted butler. His companion was surely none other than Zynool, though he had certainly seen his legs disappearing into a railway carriage some minutes ago and knew that he must now be on his way to the city. This then must be his double! Height, gestures, features, and the dense black beard, all seemed an exact facsimile of the Puranapore magnate. Mark, however, soon became preoccupied by other thoughts, and the incident faded from his memory for the time being.

He found the Collector busy in his office preparing for his intended tour on the following morning.

"I want to hear all your news presently, Cheveril," said Mr. Worsley, glancing up from his papers with kindly greeting. "How did the meeting go off—and your speech? Was your ideal Eurasian up to the mark? That isn't meant to be a pun, by the way, though it might be mistaken for one! And how is that charming friend of yours—Hester—hate to call her by her husband's name! You saw her too, eh? Well, come and tell me all about her to-night at dinner. I'll warn Moideen to excel himself in the menu!"

The Collector settled himself to his files again, and Mark to his yesterday's arrears.

When they met at dinner, Mr. Worsley was in his happiest mood and encouraged his guest to give a detailed account of all his doings in Madras. He seemed really interested in the opening of the new hall and reading-room in Vepery, for the benefit of which he had gladdened Mr. Morpeth's heart by sending a handsome donation. He was also eager to hear the latest accounts of Hester, to whom he always referred in a tone of warmest admiration mingled with pity. The incident at the close of the ball at Government House still rankled.

"The worst of it is that the fellow scored—actually scored," he said, describing the scene to Mark. "That sweet girl was punished for my having angered her husband by a chilly attitude when we were introduced earlier in the evening. I simply sat dumfounded on that sofa after the wretch had, one might say, dragged her off! What a life she is bound to have—what a vista of misery!" There was a sorrowful light in the Collector's eyes as he spoke, and he went on: "I declare it's more deadly for a woman to be tied to a bad husband than for a man to be mated to a selfish, unprincipled wife! In the latter case one can sometimes keep the seas between as a protecting barrier; but for that poor child I can only foresee a cruel future. How different things might have been—should have been," he added, darting a keen glance at his companion, whose face looked grave and troubled.

"Well, the sea does protect her just at this moment," returned Mark, rousing himself. "Rayner has taken himself off to Calcutta on a visit to some acquaintance there. But even about that, according to Colonel Fellowes whom I chanced to meet at the station, he behaved badly. The trip was first meant to include Hester, and she was looking forward to it, when Rayner is said to have stumbled on an undesirable acquaintance who persuaded him to go to Bombay and have what he called a 'good time' there."

"And so his poor wife was thrown overboard! Well, she's better without him, anyhow!"

"I was glad to see her looking so well and happy. She was evidently enjoying her visit to the Fellowes."

"I'm truly glad to hear it," said Mr. Worsley warmly. "She needs a respite from that thraldom. Yes, Mrs. Fellowes looks good, and her husband is an excellent fellow, quite the best type of sepoy officer, and has a splendid record. Did very well at the Mutiny."

The dinner was now over, and the soft-footed servants having arranged the fruit and wine, had retired. When Mark saw Moideen's retreating figure, he was reminded of the incident of the morning.

"Has Zynool a twin-brother in town or anywhere?" he asked.

"I hope not; one of Zynool's kidney is quite enough!"

"I ask because I saw, on my way from the station, a man exactly like him in close conversation with your butler."

"Zynool himself, no doubt! I wish he would let Moideen alone. I suspect there has been more mischief done than I'm aware of by these two hobnobbing," said the Collector irritably.

"No, it couldn't have been Zynool. There's the puzzle. Because I happen to have seen Zynool stepping into the train for Madras. It's really mystifying, now I come to think of it! If the man was not Zynool, as is physically impossible, it must have been his double."

"I have it," exclaimed Mr. Worsley. "It must have been my *Tahsildar* at Lerode, Mahomet Usman. I once saw him and Zynool side by side, and I own the likeness was remarkable. I happened to mention the fact and observed they both looked displeased. Mahomet Usman looked particularly glum and vowed he was no relative of Zynool's. But if the man is about to-day, why did he not present himself at the office? However, I shall clear the matter up soon, for I have intimated a visit to him to-morrow. I wonder he didn't look in when he was here. But there's no use trying to fathom these natives. Let's get to our cheroots and pass to pleasanter topics."

Mr. Worsley seemed in such comfortable health and spirits when Mark bade him good-night, that he was not a little surprised next morning when, at the hour appointed for starting on tour, one of the clerks who was to accompany the party called at his bungalow to say that the Collector was reported very unwell—quite unable to move from his bed, far less to travel.

Mark hurried to his chief to find him haggard and suffering. He wished at once to summon the doctor, but the Collector had a prejudice against all medical surveillance and would not hear of it, setting down his symptoms to mere biliousness caused by Moideen's efforts to please his palate. He certainly recovered wonderfully before evening, but on Mark's visiting him early next morning he found him suffering violent pain and attacked at intervals by severe sickness. This time he did not wait to consult the sufferer, but went at once to summon Dr. Campbell, just catching him before he started for the Dispensary in the town.

The doctor soon showed by his manner that he regarded the case as serious. The patient was fast sinking into a comatose condition. After a minute examination Dr. Campbell turned to Mark, and taking him aside told him that he had no doubt it was a case of poisoning, probably an overdose administered last night, which, with the help of the milder one on the previous night, was threatening to prove very serious.

"The action of the poison has been more effective than the poisoner intended probably," remarked the doctor.

"This is very serious," said Mark, alarm written on his face.

"Serious! I should say so! But I'll try to save him yet. I'll be back in a minute. Meanwhile, Cheveril, see you keep close watch by his bed. Don't leave him for an instant," whispered the doctor, and hurried away. He returned in a short time followed by his assistant, and the needful antidotes were skilfully applied with good result.

Neither the doctor nor Mark ever quitted the patient's bedside till the sun went down. Mr. Worsley seemed to be having some peaceful sleep, though his face looked as drawn and haggard as if he were emerging from a long illness.

Putting his arm through Mark's, Dr. Campbell drew him to the verandah which adjoined the bedroom.

"He's safe now, Cheveril, but it's been a close shave. Look here, this has been Moideen's work. It must be brought home to the villain at once."

"Yes," answered Mark. "I'm confident that man is at the root of it. But what if the Collector won't believe it? He has a very soft side to Moideen, you know."

"Too well I know it! But the man's a criminal and must be brought to justice. We dare not let his master be in his power a day longer."

Suddenly Mark recalled his glimpse of the butler in close conversation under the neem tree with Zynool's double. That the interview was in some way closely connected with the barely averted catastrophe, he did not doubt? But how to prove it?

The doctor had now left, and he sat watching the patient, noting the stronger breathing of the sleeping man, and trying to unravel the tangle of recent events without success. He had always distrusted Moideen since that first evening when he had watched his brown be-ringed feet planted behind the screen door while the Collector explained some of the difficulties of the government of Puranapore. He had no doubt of Moideen's present villainy, but how to get the Collector to admit it to his mind and to send from his side the capable servant of years, would prove a difficulty. The doctor's statement he would impatiently brush aside when he returned to health, and would point out that in this country one is always liable to such visitations; milk, fruit, and water all having possibilities of deadly effects. That this evil man should continue to have his master's confidence would, Mark felt certain, prove fatal sooner or later. Not that Moideen wished to kill his master, far from it. Probably he only exercised his unscrupulous power when he desired to further his own or his accomplices' nefarious designs. The evil spell must be broken, he resolved—but how?

Help came from an unexpected quarter! The "maty boy," a humble individual, and for a wonder, a Hindu, for Moideen generally saw to it that his staff was composed of Mahomedans, now thrust in his turbaned head at the door, but withdrew it again in an instant. Mark, perceiving that something was amiss, went to see. On looking out he perceived the "maty" and another servant exchanging dumb signs of dismay. On inquiring what the matter was, they told him in chorus:

"Butler done gone—also Ismail"—the latter being the Collector's dressing boy. "Not one left in godown; all empty, wife, children, all done gone!"

The intelligence was certainly unexpected. As the doctor's assistant appeared at that moment to relieve Mark at his post by the patient's bedside, he felt free to investigate this extraordinary piece of news for himself. Moideen was certainly nowhere to be seen; moreover, when Mark was conducted by the "maty" to Moideen's godown, by which humble name the comfortable and commodious quarters fitted up by the Collector for his favoured servant were still called, he found them empty. A sense of relief at once began to prevail. The man had by his flight sentenced himself. Without being arraigned, he had realised his position too well. Possibly the sight of Dr. Campbell's resolute face had struck terror into his conscience-stricken heart, or perhaps he had overheard the doctor's words in the verandah. Anyhow Mark felt that it was the best news he could have heard, though the big Jailer shook his head over it, when, on coming to inquire for the sick man, he was informed of the unexpected event.

"I've a good mind to have him tracked and convicted. What do you say, Judge?" he asked, turning to Mr. Goldring, who had also arrived to ask after the Collector.

"If anybody except Worsley was in question I'd have no hesitation in setting everything in train for a capture, but you know, Samptor, what Worsley is! He'll simply set himself to obstruct justice in this case. He'd hate the publicity of the affair," added the Judge, his blue eyes full of perplexity.

"Well, after all, the wretch is jolly well punished," returned the Jailer. "He's lost his fine soft berth and 'master's favour,' and all the rest of it. But I don't believe we've got to the bottom of this affair yet. Moideen didn't want to put an end to his master, be you sure of that!"

"No, the doctor thinks it was an accident," broke in Mark, "an overdose of the poison which acted with more deadly effect than was intended. Probably he was frantic when he saw what he had done. There may be a clue."

Mark proceeded to narrate his seeing of Moideen with the man whom the Collector seemed to have no doubt was the Tahsildar of Lerode.

"A clue indeed!" exclaimed Samptor, much interested. "Mahomet Usman no doubt desired for reasons of his own to have the Collector's visit postponed for a few days. That's all—though a valuable life was to be risked to attain that end. We're not unfamiliar with such methods, are we, Judge?"

"Unfortunately not," responded Mr. Goldring, shaking his head.

"Something wrong with his accounts," suggested Mark. "That's the conclusion I've come to. If the Collector will give me permission, as soon as he's able to be left, I'll hurry off to Lerode and look into the matter. We must get to the bottom of Mahomet Usman's tricks. Who knows what frauds may have been going on!"

"Let me tell you, you'll find Mahomet Usman's books in perfect order," returned Samptor. "He only wanted the extra day or two to accomplish that. They'll not be a pie wrong! It was to prevent any such discovery, don't you see, that our poor Collector has nearly been sacrificed. By all means, Cheveril, go to Lerode, but the wily Mussulman has got the start of you. His revenue collection will be all square by to-morrow or the next day. No doubt Moideen had his orders to keep the Collector quiet till then. That comes of letting those natives creep so close! Moideen was a clever dog, made himself indispensable to his master's comfort. Poor Worsley, pity his wife isn't of the sort to be at his side with the sharp eyes of my wife!"

Events turned out as Mr. Samptor predicted. Not the most searching examination of Mahomet Usman's books disclosed the slightest defalcation, though Mark felt convinced that the *Tahsildar* was aware that the new Assistant was watching for his halting, and also knew the reason why. As to finding any explanation of his conspiracy with the absconding Moideen, Mark was completely baulked.

The Collector had been very irritable and impatient when his health admitted of his being told the cause of his illness, and the certain proof which Moideen had given of his guilt by his flight only intensified his annoyance. He seemed indeed aggrieved by the whole incident and desirous of ignoring it.

Mark felt a new sense of anxiety and a need for greater daily vigilance in the combination of circumstances in which he was now placed. The relations of the Hindus with the Mahomedans in the town were increasingly unsatisfactory, even threatening; though there remained a difference of opinion as to who was the aggressive party. Dr. Campbell continued to hold a brief for the Hindus, as indeed did all the members of the little community except the Collector. Moideen had been replaced by a Mahomedan from Madras bearing a good certificate from his former master, and who seemed a much less complex character than the sinister Moideen.

Perhaps there was no one concerned in the situation who took a graver view of the possibilities of a disturbance among the seething masses of the native town than did the young Assistant-Collector, who went about his daily work with a watchful air and an anxious heart.

CHAPTER XXIX.

On the morning of the third day after her visit to Mr. Morpeth, as Hester sat with Mrs. Fellowes at early tea in the verandah at Royapooram, a chit was handed to her and the butler announced that her carriage was waiting. The note was from her husband telling her of his arrival at Clive's Road.

"Do, my darling Hester, hurry to me at once," it ran. "I am pining to hold you in my arms. I have only just arrived, but this horrid south wind is making a wreck of me already. I feel so nervous I can hardly hold a pen."

Having shared her news with her hostess, Hester rose to make hasty preparations for her departure.

"This is a blow to me," said Mrs. Fellowes. "I hoped at least to keep you a week longer with us. Your husband has evidently changed his plans."

"He has seemingly. But why should this wind be troubling him? I was just thinking how refreshing it was."

"Ah, but your husband is right there. This south wind is an enemy we dread, it is baleful in its effects, I assure you. When it first blows on one it does seem refreshing, but the very next moment one begins to feel its bad influence. It is like a gust of hot damp air blown over marshes, penetrating to one's joints and marrows."

"Alfred evidently resents it," returned Hester. "I fear it will blow away all the good effects of his change. I wonder what can have made him hurry back so soon," she added, with a sigh she repressed at once and turned to her friend, saying, "How can I thank you for all that has made this time so pleasant to me? I shall never forget these days."

The tears sprang to her eyes as she clasped her friend's hand. "I feel as if I were leaving Paradise for the thorns and thistles of the wilderness," she murmured; and in this remark she laid bare more of her heart than she had ever done, even to her trusted friend, who now looked at her with keen concern.

"But I mustn't put it like that," she added. "Poor Alfred needs me. I must go back strong and cheerful!"

Presently Mrs. Fellowes stood in the verandah with a sorrowful face watching her departing guest.

"You don't mean to say the fellow has come back already like a bad shilling and requisitioned that wife of his a whole week earlier than we reckoned on!" exclaimed the colonel with vexation, when he returned from his morning's work and heard of Hester's sudden summons to Clive's Road. "That is a blow! Why, she should have sent back the landau empty and told him he still owed her a week's release from his presence!"

"Though you say that, Joe, you know it would not be like the faithful wife she is to take things into her own hands like that," returned his wife. "But somehow my heart misgives me about her. I feel as if she were going down into a valley of suffering. But she never complains, and we must not probe her secret sorrow."

Meanwhile the pair of swift Walers had borne their mistress to her destination.

"How ill you look, Alfred!" she exclaimed, when her husband met her on the verandah steps. "What is the matter? Had you a bad passage? Surely the south wind can't affect you so much when you've only just arrived!"

"That's all you know, Hester! It's made a perfect wreck of me already. The fact is I feel more miserable than ever I did in my life," said Rayner with a groan, and threw hemself on to a lounging chair, welcoming the baleful wind as the excuse of his haggard looks, of which he was fully conscious.

The revelation made to him at the Shrine of Kali seemed still to scorch his nature like a flame, and his return to familiar scenes appeared only to intensify his misery. He scanned his wife's face anxiously to see whether by any unlucky chance she might already be in possession of the hateful secret; but he perceived nothing except sweet kindness in her demeanour, and at once began to think how foolish he had been to let the matter gnaw his heart as he had been doing. The whole story was probably trumped up by Truelove Brothers, he tried to persuade himself with a juggler-like effort at self-deception. More than likely the Eurasian clerk was the firm's tool in a conspiracy. Alternating hopes and fears still haunted him, however, as he listened to his wife's soothing talk. At length, feeling so comforted by it, he decided to absent himself from the High Court and spend the whole day in her society. Then he changed his mind, and, to Hester's surprise, his mail-phaeton instead of his office bandy was hastily ordered after breakfast. He drove off, saying he would return early and have a drive with his wife when the south wind had abated.

Hester was already experiencing the languor that accompanied the gusty wind she had at first welcomed as a friend. She tried to occupy herself with various household duties which claimed her attention after her absence. With her ayah's help she set about arranging all her possessions, taking her books and ornaments from their retreat, but was dismayed to find that the wind was bringing in its train, not only damp, but also clouds of dust. She had recourse to closing the glass doors of the drawing-room, which had always stood open since her arrival in the tropical clime, before she felt safe to spread out her treasures. She gave Mr. Morpeth's gift an honoured place among them, smiling as she laid a packet of her mother's letters in the precious casket.

When the time came for her husband's return she was surprised to see him drive up in a hired bandy instead of the mail-phaeton.

"What have you done with your phaeton?" she asked.

"You may well ask, Hester, but wait till I've taken refuge from the hurricane behind the glass doors, which I see you've been sensible enough to have closed, and I'll tell you," he said cheerfully; and linking his arm in hers, he led her to one of the sofas in the drawing-room.

"Well, what do you think I've done with my fine phaeton? Been and gone and sold it, horses, harness and all! I was going to add the syce, for he was also thrown in! I met a Mahomedan who was so enamoured of the whole turn-out that I concluded the bargain there and then!"

Hester, not being of an inquisitive turn of mind, did not ask the name of the phaeton's purchaser, and her husband preferred to withhold it. The transaction was the result of an interview with Zynool Sahib. He had appeared that morning at the High Court in an agitated state and begged to see La'yer Rayner, who had invited him to accompany him to Waller's Stables, where he had left the phaeton for some small repair. They could have a freer talk driving, Mr. Rayner had decided, than in the precincts of the High Court.

"Things are going from the bad to the worst at Puranapore," said Zynool, shaking his head dolefully. "Nothing but insults from these pigs of Hindus, backed up by that great enemee of mine, Doctor Campbell. Whatt's the good to us of the Government order stopping tom-toms and conchs at certain hours onlee. By Allah, our mosque is open day and night for prayer. These swinish sounds must not pass its door. We must stop them, La'yer Rayner," he wound up, with a significant glance at his companion.

"Yes, Zynool, that bit by the river, so near the mosque too, would make a fine site for a garden-house for you, such as you want. You desire an order to move the Hindu burning place from there, don't you ? "

" That is so," returned the Mahomedan brightening. " You're a clever one, La'yer Rayner ! "

" Wouldn't it be best to get up a little thunderstorm ? It would clear the atmosphere if you could combine and give it hot to these troublesome Hindus. Pack the town beforehand with your people from outlying villages, and the fire won't need much fanning to burst into a flame. But take care you only mine underground. Complicity found might mean the Andaman Islands ! "

Zynool's fat body shivered.

" By the holy Prophet there is need for a fight ! They come when we are at our prayers, sounding and bellowing those horrible conchs fit to break the drums of our ears."

" The Mohurram will soon be on," said Mr. Rayner. " There's a chance for you ! When you're passing in one of your processions along the streets arrange to go for some howling crowd that may be annoying you, and the fat will be in the fire ! May I be there to see, Zynool Sahib ! You'll slay many a craven wretch with that brawny arm of yours."

The Mahomedan laughed complacently as he spat on the floor of the bandy.

" Believe you are right, La'yer Rayner. I will say a word to one or two of the Faithful and try to get them up to the scratch, as you say."

" A regular dressing down is what they need. And it will give Worsley and that puppy, his sub., a scare into the bargain," said Rayner with a malicious smile. He had been surprised that the rash granting of the site for the mosque had not caused more acute trouble to the Collector of Puranapore, and his malice now prompted him to wish that he should be reprimanded or made to suffer in some way. There were possible ugly aspects in the agreeing to that site which might be used to Mr. Worsley's disadvantage, he thought with a gratified smile, though he did not share these conclusions with his companion. A breaking of the peace would do excellently well as a first move in the game.

On their arrival at Waller's, Zynool was so fascinated by the smart mail-phaeton that he at once proposed taking it over there and then as part payment of Rayner's debt to him. As his financial embarrassments were pressing, Rayner decided to part with his once much-prized possession, though he made it the occasion to ask the usurer for another loan. To this the Mahomedan willingly agreed, though he demanded higher interest. A cheque was transferred to Rayner's pocket which he went forthwith to cash at the bank; while Zynool, with childish glee, made arrangements with Waller for the sending of his latest possession to his stables at Puranapore.

Hester seemed more disturbed by her husband's news regarding the sale of his mail-phaeton than he expected.

"Surely it was too hurried a step to part with it like that," she faltered, her home ideas being against such raw haste in an important matter.

"How do you know I did it without premeditation? You women always jump to such hasty conclusions! Let me tell you, Hester, it has been at least four days simmering in my mind," returned her husband; then he stopped and bit his lip. To be sure, he thought, he must tell his wife sooner or later some tale about his quarrel with Truelove Brothers. That they were cheating him out of his rights—that was how he would put it—but he would not spoil the first day of his return by such communications. It would surely impress her favourably, for the time being, that he had in this self-sacrificing manner begun by abandoning one of his chief luxuries.

Perceiving that she seemed to regret his self-denial, he set about to make light of it, assuring her that with such a sweet wife he could afford to dispense with bachelor delights. The load of misery which had weighed him down so heavily these last days seemed already to be rolling away as he sat by Hester's side in the drawing-room shut in from the raging wind, and listened to her beautifully modulated tones as she read aloud to him.

Though he laughingly declared he was not an invalid, and did not require to be coddled when she placed her softest cushions under his head, her quick eyes discerned that from whatever cause her husband's holiday had been no gain to his health, but very much the reverse. His cheeks looked hollow and his eyes lustreless, and his step had an uncertain tread which she had never observed before.

Dinner was over, and they had again taken refuge in their sheltered retreat, for as the wind still raged the verandah was impossible. Mr. Rayner began to pace up and down the room as he listened to Hester's playing, which he seemed to appreciate as he had seldom done. In his walk he was suddenly attracted by the ivory box which lay on his wife's writing table.

"Hallo, Hester, where came you by this treasure? What a beauty! This one is real ivory and no mistake. My poor bone fellow must hide its head for ever now. Why this is a genuine work of art! What splendid carving! Did Mrs. Fellowes present this as a supreme proof of her admiration of my wife? Or did you dip deep into your own purse? I shouldn't have thought these things were in the market nowadays. Where did you pick it up?"

"Well, Alfred, I'll tell you," answered Hester slowly, as she wheeled round on the piano-stool to face her husband. "It ought to seem a peace-offering to you, for you once behaved so badly to the dear old man. Mr. Morpeth actually gave it to me the other day when Mrs. Fellowes and I paid him a visit in his most interesting house."

"You got it from *him?* You paid *him* a visit?

You actually dared to enter that man's house ?" panted her husband, growing deadly pale, his eyes flashing, and his lips quivering in uncontrolled passion. " You shall not—you shall not keep it."

As he spoke he lifted the box high above his head and dashed it on the floor, where it lay dismembered. Then with a savage gesture he stamped on the fragments, crushing them to atoms with his foot.

Hester sat staring at him as if spell-bound. She gazed alternately at her husband's face and at the ruins of her priceless box. Ignorant as she was as to the source of his wild emotion, she realised that there was something quite exceptional in his attitude. It seemed nothing less than frenzy. She rose, appalled and trembling from head to foot, her courage for once deserting her. She made a movement to cross the room and escape by the glass door to seek refuge under the dark blue heavens. Then she sank down on her seat again and, covering her face with her trembling hands, bursted into a torrent of tears.

At length she raised her eyes to her husband, who still stood with folded arms and ghastly pale, looking silently down on her. She rose from the music stool and quietly picked up, one by one, the broken fragments of the ivory box which had been so precious to her. Gathering them in the folds of her muslin gown as a child might guard its treasure, she hurried away and went upstairs, leaving her husband standing motionless and silent.

When she reached her room she sank down under the light of the lamp as if she meant to examine the broken fragments. Instead of doing so she sat holding them covered up in her lap, for there was a greater tragedy gripping her heart than the ruin of the box. Her thoughts were involuntarily following the same train as Mr. Worsley's when in his pity for the young wife he had remarked to her friend, " What a vista of misery lies before her ! "

Yes, it was some glimmering of this vista which

Hester was seeing now more clearly than she had ever done before. Was it to be in a succession of such scenes that she was to pass all her earthly years till death released her? They might be many, for she was young and strong of body. What would it matter now if to-morrow her husband were to greet her gaily and seemingly forgetful of the wounds which he had inflicted on her heart, or even if he expressed himself penitent and desirous to atone for his fit of demoniac fury? Could he efface by a light word, a manufactured smile—as he flattered himself he was able to do—the recollection of his blighting words and deeds?

Love for him was dead, but Pity was now knocking gently at the door of her tender heart. A true compassion for that disordered soul came creeping in. Surely this desperate pass made a stronger claim for her to put forth every effort to help her husband. She might perhaps, when he was calmer, be able to show him the misery which he was inflicting on both their lives by these ungoverned outbursts. She must be more brave and firm for the right than she had been in the past. Other disordered lives had been won over by patience; and was not the great patient Love of One the source of all hope and trust? To that never-failing Love she carried her burden now and found there the promised peace.

Unfolding her muslin dress, she drew forth the pitiful fragments of the shattered thing of beauty, and opening her *almirah*, brought out an old box which had been one of the treasures of her childish days. Into it she reverently laid the relics, wrapping them in a fold of paper on which she wrote the words: "The True," and the date of the tragedy. She stowed the box safely away, fearing lest even her ayah should discover it and marvel at the fate of the much-prized treasure.

CHAPTER XXX.

Joy and bustle reigned supreme in the corner house of Salamander Street, Vepery. Even its shabby exterior, with patches of chunam peeling off, disclosing its flimsy walls of lath and mud, was sharing in the dawn of coming prosperity. For had not its tenant, Mrs. Baltus, received a letter from Mrs. Matilda Rouat, her well-to-do widowed sister-in-law in Calcutta, announcing that she was desirous of paying her a lengthened visit as a paying guest? The impulse which prompted the decision was an unselfish one in the main. Rumours had lately reached Mrs. Rouat that her sister-in-law was in straitened circumstances. Being a shrewd and not unkindly soul, she decided that she might lighten the domestic burden and at the same time break the monotony of her days in Chandrychoke, the Eurasian quarter of the city where she had lived all her life.

Mrs. Rouat had even been thoughtful enough to forward "an advance"—without which important adjunct it is well nigh impossible to set the wheels of labour moving among Eastern artizans. A basket-work mender squatted in the verandah splicing the dilapidated bamboo chairs which formed the principal furniture of the bungalow rooms. Another was deftly patching the rattan-matting on the floors in case Aunt Tilly's ponderous form should be laid prone by reason of its many dangerous slits. The butler, a newly enlisted functionary—having been dismissed from higher service owing to the discovery of clumsy pilfering—was flying about in a crumpled tunic, a relic of better days, his turban all awry, trying to impress "missus" with his zeal in her service. On the little gravel sweep with its border of burnt-up grass, stood a miscellaneous collection of furniture, almirahs, cots, washstands, all receiving, at the hands of a scantily clad coolie, a coat of liquid which he called "Frenchee polishee," but which was really a cheap decoction that, in spite of the strong sun-rays, would retain its stickiness till it proved the object of much vituperation to all whose fingers came in contact with it. Mrs. Baltus, however, was charmed with its rejuvenating effect on her ancient furniture, and stepped about briskly trying to get her money's worth out of the various workers, while her daughter Leila sat darning rents in the muslin curtains, and pondering as to what were her most pressing needs and desires when she got Aunt Tilly to open her purse at the drapery counter of Messrs. Oakes & Co.

Mrs. Rouat was a great contrast to her lean, brown-skinned sister-in-law. She was almost blonde in colouring, her cheeks were ruddy, and her suffused watery eyes distinctly blue; while her treble chin, stout figure, and condition of well-to-do preservation suggested that she belonged to one of the lower orders of the British race rather than to one who had any admixture of Oriental blood. Being considerably upset by her three days at sea, Mrs. Rouat at first was quite satisfied to recline in a long bamboo chair while she listened to her sister-in-law's narrations concerning the hard times they had undergone, or was entertained by her niece playing a jingling tune on the wheezy old piano.

Presently, however, Aunt Tilly got tired of the four chunam walls of the sitting-room, though they had been washed gleaming white for her benefit. She decided that she might even forego in some measure the benefit of the punkah which was swung from the centre of the high ceiling, and shift her quarters to the window where she could entertain herself by watching the passers-by, which she perceived was the chief recreation of her niece.

Being installed there one afternoon she happened to catch sight of one with whose appearance she had once been familiar. In spite of the flight of years which had whitened his head and bent his shoulders, she at once recognised him.

"Well now, Leila, if thatt ain't David Morpeth—him as used to live in the best Eurasian quarter in Calcutta in my back days!"

"Oh, he's no rare sight," returned Leila contemptuously. "You can see him passing any day of the week. He goes in for meetings and clubs—for the good of us Vepery folk, if you please! I give him, and the likes of him, a wide berth."

"And for whatt do you do thatt?" asked Aunt Tilly, in a disapproving voice.

"Oh, they'd like to catch me and tie me to a mission stool. But I'm a match for the likes of them!"

"Well now, Leila, it strikes me you're standin' in your own light as regards thatt one, any way. He was always a good sort, was David Morpeth. I might say one of the best, for his papa and mamma were well set folk in Daramtalla, and David had a grand post in Truelove Brothers. They say he was the first Eurasian they ever made a partner. But whatt did he do but spoil himself with his marriage to a flibberty-gibbet, Rosina Castro, and never had a day's happiness till she died when their boy was born. Flo, her sister, took the boy away to England with her—as if his native land wasn't good enough for him! I don't know whatt became of them. I lost sight of the whole lot. But, Leila, since you say thatt David lives near and often passes, I've a mind to waylay him and have a chat about old times. No, I'll do better than thatt. I'll just make bold and give him a call—and take you with me. Suppose we hire thatt littlee bandy you were speaking of? We can go first to Morpeth's place and then take a drive to the fashionable beach. Yes, thatt will do veree nicely. I'd like to go drivin' up in prettee style to Morpeth's place," she wound up, patting her cinnamon-tinted curls with an air of satisfaction.

" Verree well, Aunt Tilly," replied Leila, delighted to hear that her suggestion of a drive to the beach was responded to, and deciding not to oppose the proposed visit to Mr. Morpeth, though the project was by no means to her liking. " As like as not his boy will say 'Master can't see,' " she said to herself, " but if he does let us in and he begins coaxin' me about thatt Girls' Club, I'll stand firm. Never will I set foot within thatt door again to be patronised by the like of her" ; and Miss Baltus bent over her work with an angry heart.

The hired bandy, its syce arrayed in an out-at-the-elbows blue tunic and turban, arrived duly one afternoon at the door of the house in Salamander Street. The carriage had to wait some time till Mrs. Rouat and her niece had given the finishing touches to their gay visiting toilettes. At length the older lady sank down with a sigh of satisfaction on the cushions provided by her sister-in-law as a needful addition to the springless seats of the country vehicle.

" What a grand bungalow and what a prettee garden ! " she exclaimed as the carriage drew up at Mr. Morpeth's house. " It's easy to see he's a man of substance, Leila ! "

She inquired in anxious tones if she could have a sight of the master. Mootoo at once showed the visitors into the long library, which was untenanted. The pair remained in a standing posture, Mrs. Rouat's eyes wandering over the room with keen curiosity, while even her niece could not restrain her interest in the interior of the abode with whose exterior she had been familiar all her life.

" Whatt an expense all these prettee books must have been to ship over the black water ! " remarked Mrs. Rouat, glancing with awe at the well-filled shelves. " I wonder now if he reads them," she added, recalling with a sigh how long it took her to toil through a single page of print. Leila, who devoured many second-hand yellow backs, smiled with secret scorn at her aunt's remark.

A step was heard approaching, and the master of the house appeared in the doorway. His face wore a puzzled expression as he could not recall that rotund figure with the flabby face framed by cinnamon-hued curls, who rose to meet him with a broad smile and outstretched hands. Leila he knew by sight, and from Mrs. Fellowes' description was able to identify her as the girl who had obtruded herself mysteriously into the verandah at Clive's Road. He decided that the visit must have some connection with her—perhaps she had repented of her resentful attitude and was wishing to connect herself with the Girls' Club.

With this thought passing rapidly through his mind he begged his visitors to be seated ; but Mrs. Rouat did not long leave him in doubt as to the reason of her call.

" You don't recognise an old acquaintance, Mr. Morpeth ? " she asked, setting her head on one side and looking up into his face. " Leastways, an acquaintance of your late wife, Rosina. Ah, she was a prettee creature ! " she added, with a heavy manufactured sigh.

Mr. Morpeth still looked mystified, so she continued in a higher key :

" So you don't mind Tilly Buttons as used to live next door to your Rosina in Chandrychoke ? But I've got one of the best houses in the quarter now, though I'm onlee a poor widow. I was well endowed by the late Mr. Rouat. Ah, he was a good husband."

Recollection was dawning on Mr. Morpeth.

" Yes, I remember your name," he said slowly. " And you are a widow now. Time brings changes ! "

He glanced now at Leila, who sat with a constrained air, averting her eyes.

" Ah, Mr. Morpeth," said Mrs. Rouat, mopping her face with her damp handkerchief. "It is true whatt you say! How beautifulee you put it. Time does bring changes! And to you, too, time has brought changes."

"And you, have you left Calcutta and come to live in Vepery?" Mr. Morpeth asked, preferring to divert the conversation from matters personal to himself.

"Live in Vepery! No thank you, not when I have the most beautiful up-stair house in all Chandrychoke, besides a good bit of house property round about! No, I'm onlee on a visit to my poor widowed sister-in-law, Mrs. Sarah Baltus."

"Ah, yes, and you are Mrs. Baltus' daughter?" said Mr. Morpeth, looking with a kindly smile on Leila.

"She is, and as nice a girl as ever stepped," chimed in Mrs. Rouat with a gratified air, "though I allow she's a bit stand-offish in manner for her station in life," she added apologetically, noting her niece's defiant, sulky air. "But things is going to look up now thatt I've come. I'm going to give them a good lift up before I've done. Some fine parties and some nice drives to the fashionable beach will set them up wonderful." Mrs. Rouat rolled her eyes upon her niece, who still sat with a sullen air; Mr. Morpeth made no comment on the programme.

"And so you live all alone in this veree fine house?" continued Mrs. Rouat, now fixing her eyes interrogatively on Mr. Morpeth's face. "Ah, wouldn't this grand bungalow have pleased Rosina! She was thatt fond of style! Ah, well, she's gone, but it was a thousand peeties you didn't keep hold on thatt child—a fine boy he was. But Rosina had set her heart on sending him across the black water to make an Englishman of him, and so you let Flo take him. Oh, it was a peety! Just think what a comfort he might have been to you now."

Mrs. Rouat's benevolent face looked with concern on the bent frame of the acquaintance of her youth.

"What's become of him? I hope he is still in the land of the livin'?" she asked, seeing Mr. Morpeth's face grow grey and drawn.

He seemed to hesitate whether he should break the silence. At length, with evident effort, he replied:

"No, my son is not dead. He still lives."

Then, determining to change the subject, he turned to Leila and fixed his searching eyes on her.

"And you take care of your mother in Salamander Street?" he said encouragingly.

"Mrs. Baltus is quite able to take care of herself," she returned. "I live with her because I've been jilted and have nowhere else to live," said the girl, tossing her head.

"Oh, my gracious, what rubbishee stuff is this?" cried her aunt with uplifted hands. "Never did I hear the like."

Deciding that since Leila was so sulky and her host so "stuck-up," she would rather enjoy the hired bandy in bowling along the Madras roads than remain longer surrounded by those awe-inspiring books. She rose to take leave, much to the relief of her niece, who later recounted to her mother that "it was quite a wasted hour. The man was as stiff as a poker and wished Aunt Tilly and her twaddle at the bottom of the sea!"

Mrs. Rouat took her seat among the cushions in the bandy with a sense of disappointment. Her visit had evidently not been a pleasure to her old acquaintance.

"Sure, I wanted nothing more from David Morpeth but a hearty word for the sake of old times!" she sighed.

"Maybe, Aunt Tilly, but the man's so used to Eurasian beggars he could only credit us with being on some such whining errand."

"Oh, fie, Leila Baltus, you *are* bitter! How could he class us with such? But I don't think he half liked my rippin' up his old mess by referrin' to Rosina though," added Mrs. Rouat musingly. "'Pon my word, he turned as white as a pucka Englishman at the veree mention of her name."

"My gracious, from whatt you've been tellin' me about Rosina I think he must have been precious glad to be rid of her—and her brat too! But it was when you spoke of the son thatt he grew so white. I was sharp enough to see thatt. Anyhow I'm glad I choked off any fuss about my joinin' the Girls' Club. He didn't even get a word in sideways about thatt, though I read in his eye he'd have liked to have a try!"

"And whatt if he did? It would only be for your good! But whatt ever was thatt nonsense you were speakin' about bein' jilted? Was it all a make-up?"

"A make-up! I wish it were," returned Leila bitterly. "I suppose I am not the onlee woman who has had thatt trouble. But if she's not a fool she'll get even with the man, as I mean to do yet!"

This remark was lost on Mrs. Rouat, owing to the jingling of the bandy on the laterite road, and conversation flagged amid the distractions of the surroundings.

The drive to the beach was such an unwonted experience to Leila that she soon recovered her equanimity, while her aunt enjoyed herself lolling back among the cushions. The growing heat of the day made the comparative coolness of the evening welcome to the jaded dwellers in Madras. The south wind with its accompaniment of damp and red dust was now replaced by gentle zephyrs from the golden west. Leila was anxious to make the most of her rare opportunity of seeing "the quality," and also desirous to impress her aunt with the elegance of her surroundings. She directed the bandy-wallah to drive along Government Park Road and cross the fine bridge over the Cooum from where they could catch a better glimpse of the island which, in spite of the waxing heat, still glimmered green, so that one could hardly believe the close grimy streets of Black Town were not a mile distant from the verdant retreat.

There was still a number of carriages driving beachwards, although the exodus to the hills had begun. Those whose lot it was to linger on the hot plains, having less energy for paying calls or taking part in gymkhanas, always at this evening hour drove to the shore to breathe the sea air. The occupants of the various carriages were often content to conduct conversations with each other while sitting in their respective chariots. Some, more enterprising, alighted and took a stroll on the well-kept promenade which flanked the expanse of sand sloping to the waves, where a little company of pale-faced English babies trotted about, pecking at the wet sand with their tiny spades, guarded by their ayahs and boys who squatted beside them, ever their devoted slaves, patiently erecting mimic sand forts and bridges to be imperiously annihilated by their little lords and masters.

Desirous of getting the full benefit of each phase of the evening, Mrs. Rouat insisted that her bandy should take a good place among the ranks of carriages. She reclined for some time talking volubly, watching with delight the English children disporting themselves, and taking a keen interest in the growing throng of carriages, estimating their owners by the elegance of their equipages, while the smart morning toilettes, fresh from the latest box from home, were a source of inspiration to both aunt and niece, and projects were set on foot for their imitation as nearly as might be reached by the *dersai*.

Presently Mrs. Rouat announced that she desired to alight and mingle with the strollers, which seemed the "most chic thing to do," as she expressed it, especially as she realised that the bandy did not make such an elegant setting for herself and her handsome niece as she desired.

With Leila's help her ponderous person was safely landed on the pavement, and the pair set out on their promenade to make a closer inspection of the "fine societee."

"Now, Leila, here comes whatt I call a downright handsome pair," Mrs. Rouat remarked enthusiastically, as a young couple came towards them. "Oh, my, whatt a lovelee lady! I haven't seen such a beautee all my days!"

Her niece had caught sight of the pair a moment before as they drove up in their shining landau. Her keen eye had watched the gentleman help the lady to alight, and she knew that she was coming face to face with Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Rayner. With darkening visage and beating heart she walked by her aunt's side, who fortunately, in her excitement over the "prettee lady," had unlinked her arm from her niece's, else she would have felt the tremor that was passing over the girl's frame.

Mrs. Rouat's stare was so marked that Hester could not help being conscious of it. She decided that she must be some Vepery mother who knew her, then she caught sight of the girl's haughty face marked by rage and hate as she fixed her gaze on her husband, who met it with a stony stare of well-assumed unrecognition.

"Oh my gracious me, whatt's the matter now, Leila Baltus?" exclaimed her aunt. "You look all the colours of the rainbow! Has this walking business been too much for you? Come, let's turn! My legs has got a straightenin'. But, girl, whatever's ailin' you? Why are you glowerin' after thatt couple as if you could stick them? They ain't no friends of yours, surelee! They're too high up for thatt."

"Friends of mine!" echoed the girl with a harsh laugh. "The devil's my friend if that man is! I'll not hide it from you, Aunt Tilly, now you've spotted him. He's the veree one that jilted me most foully—went off and wed thatt one in England when he should have wedded me. Oh, I hate her! Don't tell me she's a beautee! My feelin's won't bear it"; and the girl threw herself into the bandy, covered her face and sobbed convulsively.

"Well I never! This is a prettee kettle of fish!

You in an open carriage sittin' howlin' like a babee. Come now, Leila, be sensible! Put your hat straight, fan your eyes, and tell me all about this jilt of yours. My word, he looks bold enough! He seems to feature someone to my mind. Whatt's his name, Leila?"

"Alfred Rayner," responded the girl, her wild paroxysm being succeeded by a sullen air.

"Alfred Rayner, did you say?" exclaimed Mrs. Rouat in open-mouthed astonishment. "Why, if thatt isn't the veree name I was chasin' after in my head when I sat in that fine libraree of David Morpeth's. Rayner was Flo's name, and Rosina called her boy Alfred, thinkin' it a veree grand name. He's Rosina's boy! He's handsome, but a pert lookin' baggage, the very image of his mother! Well, if this isn't an odd meetin' on the Madras beach!"

"Then Alf Rayner's old Morpeth's son? La, whatt a lark!" said the girl, with an alert expression coming into her eyes. "Do you know, Aunt Tilly, he sets up for hating us Eurasians like poison—and he's as much a half-caste as any of us!"

"Of course he is! Did you ever doubt it, you silly? With my fair complexion—I pass, but Rosina's son—never!"

"Oh my gracious, but this is a joke," laughed Leila harshly. "Why, I've begun to be even with the man already! Didn't he taunt my mother that he never dreamed of marryin' among the like of us? This is a prime secret you've let us into, Aunt Tilly! I'm sure his elegant wife doesn't know he's a half-caste!"

"More than like the lad don't know it himself," returned her aunt, shaking her head. "His Aunt Flo was as big a fibber as was goin', and a boaster into the bargain! She'd never have let him into the truth—not if she could keep it from him!"

"I say, Aunt Tilly," said Leila eagerly. "Wouldn't it be a good joke to look in on them one fine afternoon when you have the bandy again and let out the secret on them? 'Twould be a bombshell to Alf as well as to thatt proud English ladee! She don't look half such a beautee as she did when I first caught sight of her. Well, whatt do you say to my plan?"

"Wouldn't it be kind of spiteful?" objected Mrs. Rouat. "Mind you, Leila, I don't go in with malice!"

"Well then, couldn't we just pay them a visit as you did Mr. Morpeth? Your veree clever at managing, and you would get a sight of their lovelee fine house into the bargain."

"I own I'd like to have another good look at Rosina's boy and that prettee wife of his. But I can't afford to hire the bandy again for a bit."

"Oh, as to thatt, Alf won't run away. A call will do any time," the girl wound up, resolving that before many days elapsed she would lead Aunt Tilly triumphantly to Clive's Road and at last "be even" with the man she hated.

"There are only half-caste bounders crawling about here, Hester," said Alfred Rayner irritably, after the encounter with Leila Baltus and her aunt. "Mrs. Glanton and all our acquaintances have gone to the hills. Go where you will, seemingly, you only get stared at by these odious creatures. Suppose we go towards the Ice House, where we may get a chance of the pavement to ourselves."

Hester agreed, nothing loth to prolong her walk, and they wandered on facing the coast with its circling outlets and the great swelling ocean flooded now by the evanescent afterglow of the setting sun. Hester's eye was fascinated by the tender spreading light. She was gazing intently seaward, and did not notice the solitary pedestrian who was slowly approaching them. Her husband did, however, and now and here in this peaceful gloaming was to be enacted a supreme tragedy for two lives. Not till they were face to face did Hester perceive that the solitary walker was none other than David Morpeth. Her heart throbbed uneasily, for she had remarked that more than once even the mention of his name had been the signal for a furious outburst on her husband's part. Her face betrayed her nervousness as she bowed and smiled. But to-night David Morpeth had no eyes for his sweet young friend who held such a warm place in his heart. A letter had reached him from Mr. Fyson of Truelove Brothers some days ago which definitely told him that Alfred was now aware of their close relationship, though Mr. Fyson had refrained from sharing with him the cruel words in which Alfred announced that for the future he rejected with disdain his father's allowance. This was a crucial moment for both—their first meeting since the son was in possession of the secret of his birth. For a second he stared with a searching, fascinated glance at his father's face; while the father, as he raised his hat to Hester, was casting a yearning look of love and longing upon his son. Then he held out his hand, not to Hester, but to his son. Had Alfred willed it, a moment more and life might have been changed for both these defrauded ones! But the young man's corrupted will leant all the other way. He held his hand stiffly by his side, saying:

"Come along, Hester, the breeze is getting chilly!" He put his arm in hers and almost pulled her away. "Didn't I tell you the beach was simply crawling with these half-castes to-night," he muttered, as he pushed past his father with an angry scowl.

The old man's hand dropped. His face took an ashen hue. The bedrock of trouble had been fathomed. He gazed after his son with a face of unutterable sorrow.

"Oh my God!" he groaned. "Save him from the curse of spurning a father's love! Is this my punishment for the sore blunder I made in keeping a rash vow?" And he moved on with the step of a broken man.

"Alfred, how could you? Oh, this is terrible," murmured Hester, with a look of horror mingled with fear as she glanced at her husband's scowling face.

She felt she must protest, whatever it cost her. "Did you not see he wanted to speak to us?—to you particularly? He even held out his hand to you and you were so cold—oh, so cruel!"

"Yes, I meant to be! There's no other way of choking off these half-castes. I tell you, Hester, if you want to be a good wife to me you'll cut all that connection with Vepery. It's only a perpetual annoyance to both of us."

Hester made no reply, and was glad to take refuge in the carriage and be driven swiftly home without exchanging words with her husband. She absented herself from dinner with a sense of physical illness upon her as well as a heart sick with sorrow and shame.

Had she known it, her husband's waking thoughts that evening, as well as his dreams that night, might have found a place in Dante's Inferno. His haggard aspect was piteous to behold when he came down to late breakfast next morning. There had been no rising with the dawn for him; his feverish dreams did not vanish with the night, but made part and parcel of all his daylight hours.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE first frenzy, which succeeded the reception of the secret imparted to Alfred Rayner at the Shrine of Kali had subsided. Never again after the terrible scene in the drawing-room at Clive's Road when he had crushed the ivory box with such ferocity, and the still more poignant one in which he had spurned his father when brought face to face with him, had the unhappy man given way to any ebullition of temper.

Though these incidents were graven as if by hot iron on his wife's heart, she made no allusion to them and even tried to forget them. Her attitude towards her husband was now more like that of a mother to a weak, erring child than that of a young wife to the husband of her choice. Alfred's evident efforts at self-restraint were very patent to her and touched her tender heart many times every day. He seemed in fact to cling to her with almost child-like affection, and she spared no efforts to make the days pass harmoniously. Being deprived of his mail-phaeton, he now accompanied her in her evening drives, never lingering at the Club or other resorts as he had formerly done. The occasion on which they were met by Mrs. Rouat and her niece was one of the many in which no untoward incident had happened. They walked peacefully on the beach or sat in their landau enjoying the rising of the evening breeze, so welcome after the airless hours of the long hot day. But Leila Baltus judged truly when she said that Hester's brilliant beauty had gone. She looked pale and wan, and there was an air of languor about her whole bearing. Her pretty frocks too were becoming stained by the damp red dust, and she was at no pains to replace them. Even her books grew spotted with the red powdering, and she could not open an old favourite without seeing its baleful traces. Intense lassitude invaded her, and sometimes her effort to greet her husband cheerfully seemed well-nigh impossible, though she still kept a brave heart and a cheerful mien, and still joined Mrs. Fellowes at the meeting for the Eurasian girls.

Her friend, however, perceived that there was a subtle change in her. She seemed less frank and accessible than formerly. Recalling with what pleasure she had welcomed the visit to Mr. Morpeth, Mrs. Fellowes suggested they should repeat it one afternoon, but Hester had rejected the proposal almost coldly. Neither did Mrs. Fellowes fail to note how pathetic Mr. Morpeth looked when in a conversation with him she had dwelt on her anxiety concerning their mutual friend. On confiding to him that she and the colonel felt convinced her marriage was not a happy one, she observed that, though he had been about to make some reply, he suddenly lapsed into pained silence and seemed unable to even rouse himself to interest over his schemes for the good of the Vepery people. Alfred Rayner had so often of late come back from the High Court with an air of depression that Hester was surprised one evening when he returned home in his office-bandy in high excitement.

"I've great news for you, my darling," he greeted her gleefully, as he hurried up the verandah steps. "I've been and gone and shaken the pagoda tree, as the natives say, and I've brought down a crop of gold! To the hills at once, Hester, and gather your English roses once more. I can't stand those pale cheeks a day longer."

"But, Alfred," she faltered, recalling her last disappointment and deciding not to be too sanguine. "Why this sudden idea?"

"It's not sudden, I've been thinking of it for some time, and now I can do it," he cried, with an excited laugh. "Is it to be Ooty or Conoor? Which does your fancy turn to?"

"Oh, Ooty would be my choice if we were really going to the hills. Those Blue Mountains—those great grassy slopes they talk about have always fascinated my imagination," replied Hester, with a dreamy smile.

"Well, Ooty, be it! I think you're right. I shall wire at once and see if we can get rooms at an ideal boarding-house I know. I'm particularly anxious to be off at once. I've a case in Court to-morrow, but the day after we can start. Now, all you've got to do is to pack up and 'Come away all for the sake of a holiday'"; and humming the then popular song, Rayner hurried off to his writing-room for the telegram forms.

The evening was spent in talk concerning the coming holiday and the planning of expeditions, for Mr. Rayner had spent a vacation month at Ootacamund previous to his furlough and knew it fairly well. He decided that it would be well to send a letter to follow his telegram to the lady-manager of the boarding-house where he hoped to get rooms. On leaving for the High Court next morning he carried the letter with him.

"I'll not even trust it with my other *tappal* in case of misadventure," he remarked. "When the reply to my wire arrives be sure to open it so that you may not be kept an unnecessary moment from your happy prospect. Won't it be joy to me to carry you off from these vile plains to the glorious Blue Mountains! It'll be worth everything," he added enigmatically, as he drove off.

Her husband's delight in the prospect was infectious. Hester smiled in sympathy and began to busy herself with preparations, bringing forth her warmest garments which had been stowed away in camphor by her careful ayah.

The day passed all too quickly. The hour for Mr. Rayner's return and the evening drive had arrived, when a shabby bandy was driven up to the verandah steps. Two visitors descended from it and were shown to the drawing-room by the butler. Hester, on going to receive them, at once recognised one of them as the haughty-looking girl who had mysteriously presented herself at the "Friendly" and in her verandah. It was, however, the older woman, unknown to her, who took the lead. She rose from the comfortable chair in which she had seated herself and addressed Hester with a broad smile on her face.

"Maybe you'll not know me. I'm Mistress Rouat from Chandrychoke, Calcutta, on a visit to my sister-in-law—this young lady's mother in Vepery."

"I'm glad to see you, Mrs. Rouat," said Hester, deciding that at last the wilful niece had been brought as a prospective member of the Girls' Club by this benevolent-looking aunt, though on glancing at the girl she was obliged to admit that her haughty demeanour was not hopeful. She made no response to Hester's friendly outstretched hand, but stood quite still, then with a nod to her aunt she resumed her seat.

Mrs. Rouat leaned back in her chair and fixed her eyes on Hester.

"Though you don't know me, my dear, and maybe your husband won't either, seeing he was but a babee when he last saw me, yet believe me, Mrs. Rayner, I am a veree old friend of the family! Your husband's dead mother, Rosina Castro, and me was veree chief when we lived next door in Chandrychoke—thatt's the Eurasian quarter—or one of them, in Calcutta, in case you don't know, bein', as I hear, new from England. Also Mr. David Morpeth, your husband's father, was well known to me. In fact I had the pleasure of calling for him the other day——"

"Mr. Morpeth! I don't quite understand," faltered Hester. "I think you are making some mistake. Mr. Morpeth is in no way related to my husband."

"Ain't he just," said Leila, with a harsh laugh.

"It's you thatt's makin' the mistake, ladee," Mrs. Rouat went on. "Alfred Rayner is David Morpeth's veree own son, born in lawful wedlock, I do assure you, and there's others can vouch for thatt as well as me. The good man himself will not deny it if you was puttin' it to him, he was always a truth-lovin' man was David, veree different from his late wife, Rosina."

Mrs. Rouat glanced uneasily at Hester, and reminded herself that she must keep in mind the close relationship of the "parties."

"Your information is incorrect," said Hester firmly. "Unfortunately my husband has no relatives in India or anywhere else. His father and mother both died when he was a child," she added placidly, never doubting the truth of her assertion.

"Tell thatt to your grandmother," interjected Leila, with a rude laugh. "It's easy to see, Aunt Tilly, she's been taken in by Alfred's lies same as I was till he jilted me," ended the girl, with a spiteful glance on the paling face of the woman she hated.

Hester rose from her chair, folded her hands, and said in a restrained voice:

"I must ask you to excuse me! Boy, call the carriage," she added, calling the butler. Then she passed out of the room, leaving the aunt and niece staring at each other with discomforted air.

"Perhaps I acted a little suddenly," murmured Hester to herself, as she climbed the stair to her room. "But Alfred may be here at any time, and if he found these two Eurasians seated in the drawing-room, I really could not answer for the consequences! I suppose their extraordinary tale has been manufactured by that fat person. It does seem very odd—and what was that the girl said about Alfred having jilted her? Perhaps she is under some hallucination, but I dare not mention it to Alfred. One of these terrible fits of temper would be sure to follow, and just when we are going to try to be happy and throw off all our worries on the Blue Mountains."

But the longer Hester's thoughts dwelt on the visitors' tale, the more uncomfortable she felt. She recalled how the woman had mentioned Mr. Morpeth, and decided that her husband's aversion to the good Eurasian must be known to the community.

"There was evident malice in it all. What a cruel plot to spring upon us all of a sudden!" she said to herself, as she busied herself with preparations for the coming journey, finding relief from her troubled thoughts.

Soon, however, she began to wonder why her husband was delaying his return. The landau had been waiting for some time for the evening drive, but at length she dismissed it to the stables, not being inclined for a solitary drive. The hour for dinner arrived and still he did not appear, nor was there any message from him which surprised her, since he had been unfailingly punctual of late. After her lonely dinner she betook herself to her home-letters for the outgoing mail on the following day, eager to share with her dear ones the great news that she was to exchange the hot winds and red dust for the breezy Neilgherry Hills.

It was not till nearly midnight that she began to grow really anxious about her husband's non-appearance. All was silent about the house. The butler had gone for the night to his own home in one of the villages near. The other servants had retired to their godowns, and the maty-boy in charge lay on his mat in deep slumber in a back verandah. Even the ayah had retired to her corner in the room next to her mistress's, having first paid one or two visits to see whether "Dosani" was not thinking of going to bed. Still Hester sat in the verandah, looking out on the vivid dark blue of the cloudless sky, inhaling the penetrating scents of the aromatic shrubs which bounded the gravel sweep. Sometimes she fancied she caught the sound of an approaching footfall, but decided it was only a stirring among the ghost-like trees. Once or twice she dozed, to awaken with a start as if someone was whispering her name, bu t cy the mingling eerie sounds of the Indian night fell on her listening ear.

CHAPTER XXXII.

If we had followed Mr. Rayner to the High Court on the morning of the day when his wife waited for him in vain in the verandah at Clive's Road, his failure to return home might have been explained. Yet, when it is told that it was only the sudden sight of a face which had scared him and upset all his plans, and that, the familiar face of Zynool Sahib, some further explanation of the circumstances seems needful.

For this we have to go back to his last meeting with the Mahomedan at Waller's Stables, when Zynool had handed him a cheque for a further loan, having taken over the mail-phaeton as part payment of the previous transaction. In his haste, for he was anxious to catch the train for Puranapore, Zynool had given Mr. Rayner the signed cheque still attached to the cover of his cheque-book, believing it to be the last in the book, and being careless as to retaining the counterfoils. Not till Zynool had gone did Alfred Rayner observe that there was still an unused cheque in the book. Smiling at his client's carelessness, he placed the signed cheque in his pocket-book, and thrust the pink cover with the remaining one into the pocket of his jacket, meaning to hand it to Zynool with some chaffing remark when next they met.

Zynool's loan was much needed and was quickly spent. The absence of the hitherto unfailing allowance from Truelove Brothers was making itself felt. His financial outlook seemed at his darkest when, one morning, he came on something in the pocket of his coat which suggested a solution of his pressing difficulties. It was the crumpled remains of the pink cover with the blank cheque still affixed to it which he had fully meant to restore to its owner. But a good many hours had struck in Alfred Rayner's moral life since then, and each had been dragging him steadily downward. His determined repudiation of his father, his unbridled fury at the thought of having any connection with Eurasians, the lies and subterfuges which a false position entails, all had undermined a character which had never been sterling. When, therefore, as his fortunes were at their lowest, he came upon the blank cheque it presented an overmastering temptation. He quickly formed the plan of using it, saying to himself that, of course, he would replace the money presently, and encouraging himself with the knowledge that Zynool, though shrewd, had no business habits, and it might be long before he discovered the little transaction—theft, he would not call it, for he might be able to replace every pie in a few days. Having decided that he might with impunity risk the fraud, it was quite easy for him to forge his client's familiar signature, his sprawling handwriting lending itself with facility to the deception, nor would there be any difficulty in his cashing the cheque; it being well known at the bank that he was Zynool's man of business and had frequent money transactions with him. In fact, the deed was done with such ease that a more sensitive man might have been startled at the ready complicity of fate in his crime. He walked jauntily out of the Bank after having counted his notes and exchanged a few pleasant words with the cashier. Then he resolved that this new "loan," as he preferred to call it, should be devoted to carrying his wife from the hot plains to a hill sanatorium, and had eagerly hurried home to divulge his plans.

Nemesis, however, began to dog his steps with appalling swiftness. The very next afternoon at the High Court, when he was engaged in conducting a case on the success of which he was eagerly reckoning, it came with rapid strides. Adorned with his wig and gown, he was holding forth, unusually pungent and successful in his arguments, when who should he see standing by the door watching him with a sardonic smile but Zynool Sahib! The beady eyes flashed fire, and the amber face had the look of a beast of prey. From the moment that Alfred Rayner's eye lighted on the man whom he had wronged, he had not a shadow of doubt that the Mahomedan was aware of the fraud so lightly perpetrated on him; and he knew also that he could expect no mercy at his hands. There was a malignant triumph in Zynool's eyes which told that he had trapped his victim. "Trapped"—the word echoed in the barrister's head as he made a violent effort to continue his speech; but he, who had been so glib in his arguments a moment before, now stammered and looked so faint that even the Judge did not fail to notice his threatening collapse, and more than one pair of eyes were fixed on him with a questioning stare. Nor did the torture of his spirit lessen when he observed that a Mussulman attendant had crept up to Zynool and whispered something which caused the Mahomedan to leave the court-room quickly.

"There's a warrant waiting for me outside," he groaned inwardly.

When the Court broke up Rayner quite expected to find his declared foe waiting at the door, surrounded by emissaries of the law, but he was nowhere to be seen. Presently, however, he was approached by a peon from the Bank, who politely handed him a letter from the manager.

"Ha, the fat's in the fire, sure enough! I'm as good as hauled off to prison," he muttered. Then an inspiration seized him. Glancing at the phlegmatic peon he told him to wait for his reply. He went in search of the Mahomedan official whom he had observed talking to Zynool before he left the Court. The man being of a lower rank, Rayner decided that

Zynool would probably have made no communication to him concerning the forgery.

"Is Zynool still in town?" he asked.

"He is not," was the reply. "He intended to remain in town, for he said he had important business, but his son-in-law came with news—veree grave news from Puranapore."

There was a threatening of a riot in Puranapore, it seemed, and it was feared that Zynool's house might be attacked, so he had hastened back by the earliest train.

"Just as I supposed," said Rayner to himself, having recognised the youth who brought the news, and thought it must be some urgent message. "So the fat's in the fire there too! Well, it's an ill wind that blows no one good," he muttered, going into the writing-room where he set himself to write to the manager of the Bank, acknowledging his letter and explaining that he was detained by important legal business till after the closing hour of the Bank, but that he would call early next morning, and added:

". . . If your note refers to the misunderstanding about my friend Zynool Sahib's cheque, I have just seen him and it is completely cleared up. I need hardly say it was his own blunder."

Handing his letter to the waiting peon with an easy air, he turned away with a very different expression on his face. After standing hesitating for a moment what his next move should be, he hurried out at a side-door which opened on a back street. He saw a little country carriage, like a box on wheels, which the natives call a *jatka*, standing near. Hailing it, he jumped in with alacrity, telling the driver to go out the Mount Road. He found no difficulty in concealing himself in the windowless little box, though he cowered in a corner with a throbbing heart as the pony ambled along. He was indifferent as to where he went, but on he must go till darkness should throw its concealing mantle over him. At length he reached the Thousand

Lights Bazaar, and calling on the *jatka-wallah* to stop, he alighted and paid his fare. After wandering about among the stalls he explained to a bazaar-vendor in Tamil, which he spoke with ease, that he wished to purchase a turban. Buying the number of yards of muslin which the merchant assured him were indispensable, he asked that it should be twisted into shape. The request seemed to astonish the dealer not a little, that process being generally accomplished by the customer himself on his head. However, with a good-natured laugh he deftly adjusted the folds and handed it to him. After paying for his purchase and the additional sum demanded for the making up of the headpiece, Rayner hurried away, walking rapidly on till he came to a patch of jungle which skirted the road. Plunging into it, he caught sight of a small tank in its centre which reflected the yellow moon. He dropped his sun-topee into the water, watching the ripples that appeared on the smooth surface as it sank, for he had attached a stone to it.

"Probably a needless precaution," he muttered, "but one can't be too careful."

He adjusted the turban on his head, and divesting himself of his coat, he turned it inside out, its lining being of a pale-coloured silk.

"In the dark I'll pass for some nondescript, at least. Nobody will recognise the smart 'La'yer Rayner' in this guise," he said with a grim smile, as he caught his reflection in the moon-silvered water. "Bother this bright moonlight, but for it I might have no fear of recognition!"

Prudence seemed to dictate that he should remain for a time concealed in the jungle plot. At length, after consulting his watch under the clear light of the moon, he decided that it was safe to emerge and make his way townwards. Consecutive thought was in abeyance, but his one idea was somehow to reach his wife and throw himself on her mercy in his desperate plight; for he was well aware he had only retarded his possible capture by some hours. An unpleasant surprise in the shape of a waiting police-official might even be in store for him when he reached Clive's Road, but he thought he could reckon himself safe till next morning, only he would take careful observation before he trusted himself within the precincts of his own compound, and would not venture near till the night was well advanced.

Steadily he trod townwards, his footfalls echoing on the empty road. There was no need to divest himself of his boots and walk in his silk socks as he had thought of doing, there being not a single soul to take note of him.

When he reached the streets he congratulated himself there would only be loafers and waifs about, who would take no account of such a hybrid as he looked in his motley dress.

He did not follow a direct route to Clive's Road, but thinking he had made sure that his direction was towards it, he was surprised to find that he had, all unwittingly, stumbled into Vepery. Never had he set foot in that quarter since his return to Madras. He glanced at the silent rows of shabby houses, with feeble lights still flickering from some of their windows in spite of the lateness of the hour. As he passed a corner house which was in darkness, he saw a figure leaning against one of the chunam posts where a gate should have swung. It had so lately received a fresh coat of white that the female figure stood out in relief. Rayner glanced towards the woman involuntarily and started. The girl also gave a start. In spite of his disguise, Leila Baltus had no difficulty in recognising him. A quick hope seized her, "Alfred's repented! He's come here in that comic make-up to make it up with his old love! Alf, I'm here—waiting for you," she said in a loud whisper.

"Here's a pretty mess—of all people to stumble on *her!*" he muttered to himself, quickening his steps.

But Leila Baltus would not allow him to escape. Running after him, she laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't be shy, Alf! You know you've come to kiss and be friends! La, but whatt a guy you do look!" she exclaimed with a giggle, getting in front of him. "I say, did *she* turn you out like thatt after hearin' the news from Aunt Tilly and me this veree afternoon thatt your pa was a half-caste? I swore I'd be even with her and I've got my wish. Ha, ha!" And she danced in front of him, obstructing his efforts to pass her.

"You fiend! What are you saying?" cried Rayner in a desperate voice. "You didn't dare to do that! Get out of my way, I'm in no mind for your jokes!"

"Ho, ho, thatt's how it is—your fine wife's done with you, and yet you won't be in with me! Come, Alf," she said in a persuasive tone. "I'll get you a nice prawn curry for the sake of old times, late though it is. What a good thing I was taking a gasp of air past midnight!"

"Out of my way, girl! Do you wish to drive me mad?" cried Rayner, as he forcibly detached the girl's hand from his arm and pushed her against the wall, while he took to his heels and ran till at length, hearing no footsteps behind him, he concluded that he had got rid of his tormentor, and slackened his pace.

"I wonder if the spiteful minx did really go and pour out her venom on Hester? Well, I feared it might come, and now that everything is tumbling about my ears it doesn't much matter. There's no future for us in Madras, that's clear, but I've sharp wits, I'll make a living at home—and the Bellairs have influence. Hester will never forsake me," he murmured with an encouraged air. "We'll set sail at once for England."

He was now passing a riotous haunt, which even at this hour echoed with boisterous voices and laughter, and flaring lights streamed from the verandah where loungers drank and smoked, but he turned away his eyes in disgust and sped on his way. As he walked along one of the more secluded roads of Vepery, his eye lighted on a white gate on which was written, in letters that he could trace in the clear moonlight—Freyville.

"Why, that's the name of *his* house," he muttered, staring with fascinated eyes on the abode of his father. "Strange that I should have stumbled on it to-night of all nights!"

It had a placid, winning air; two of the wide windows which gave on the verandah stood open and a light burned within. He could see a grey head bending over a big book which lay on a table.

For a brief moment a sudden impulse came to the fugitive in his desperate plight. Should he walk in and present himself to the old man? A swift intuition whispered that even after all that had come and gone a hand would be held out at the eleventh hour to save him. The threatening hoofs of the Australians, the insulting words spoken in his verandah, and the repudiation at the beach—all would be blotted out by that one word "father"; ay, and more, the means to extricate him from the pit which he had digged for himself and into which he had fallen, would most surely be forthcoming. Even now it was not too late to compromise with Zynool and the Bank. The man seated there could doubtless do it for him. Would he say that needful word, he asked himself, as he laid his hand on the latch of the white gate. Just at that moment, the silent reader in the silent room raised his head. The searching eyes looked out as if stirred by some consciousness that something untoward was afoot.

"No, I shan't play the returned prodigal—not in my line," muttered Rayner, suddenly dropping the latch. "I'll rather cut the whole concern—work my way to Karrachi, arrange to meet Hester when safer, hurry home to England, and turn over a new leaf there."

Striding rapidly on his way, he never halted till he reached the precincts of Clive's Road, where he began to tread more cautiously. He removed his boots, pulled his turban down over his eyes, and kept close to the hedge which skirted the compound, starting even at his own shadow, and listening intently to every sound that broke the silence of the Indian night.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HESTER was still sitting in the verandah waiting her husband's return. Her own preparations for the projected journey to the hills were well advanced, but there was still a good deal to settle before their departure, and she had expected Alfred to hurry home earlier than usual to complete all arrangements. Not realising how late it was, she reckoned that he must have been detained by some important interview with a client. As she sat with folded hands wearily waiting, her thoughts suddenly reverted to the disagreeable visitors of the afternoon and their extraordinary communication. It seemed to take shape in her mind for the first time and she sighed softly.

"I only wish Mr. Morpeth had been Alfred's father! How differently he would have brought him up from that silly aunt whose memory he despises!"

But the story was so evidently the outcome of malice that it was hardly worthy of consideration. Perhaps this Leila Baltus had been a former acquaintance of Alfred's. The thought had occurred to her before, and now she felt certain of it, and yet it seemed strange in the light of his bitter prejudice against the Eurasian community. But evidently the girl did owe him a grudge, and it was not pleasant to think of; so Hester tried to dismiss the incident from her mind.

She rose from her lounging chair and began to pace up and down the verandah, looking out on the moon-silvered lawn and drinking in the peace of the midnight landscape. A slight movement of one of the side blinds of the verandah which had not, like the others, been raised at sunset, now arrested her attention. She drew some steps nearer. Through one of the chinks of the rattan, which was being gently pushed up, she caught sight of a pair of eyes. For a moment she stood riveted to the spot with terror, then she turned with the intention of rousing the "maty," whom she knew to be stretched in deep slumber in the verandah at the back of the house, but a voice whispered through the chinks—"Hester."

The tone that fell on her ear was not familiar. Was it a ghostly presence that had crept near her? Those eyes had looked so terrible. They were withdrawn now, and she heard a light footfall on the steps which froze her blood within her. Suddenly her husband stood before her in his strange garb and with so wild and distraught a bearing that her terror was hardly lessened.

"Alfred," she gasped. "What is the matter? Why have you come like this?"

"Hush, Hester, don't speak so loud. Nobody must hear. Are you quite alone? Nobody about—all the servants gone?" whispered her husband, glancing round furtively.

"Alfred, what has—How awful you look—and that dress. What has happened?"

"Yes, I must look an awful guy! I'm sorry I've scared you! I might at least have taken off the turban before I showed myself—seeing I'm not a native, anyhow," he added, with a bitter laugh. Then springing forward he took hold of his wife's trembling hands and wailed in a piteous tone: "Oh, Hester, you won't desert me? Whatever happens, whatever you may hear about me. There will be many lies afloat. Hester, I'm in mortal trouble, everything has tumbled to bits——"

"Alfred, is it—is it that you've just found out—since you left this morning—that Mr. Morpeth is your father?" she asked, holding his hands and looking into his eyes.

"So you've heard that!" he gasped. "It's true what that fiend told me——"

"But why trouble about that?" said Hester gently. "I have just been thinking how good it would be if it were true! I know you have hated Eurasians, but—but if your father is one, surely that prejudice will snap like a gossamer thread. Think how noble he is—and Mark Cheveril too."

As she spoke that name, a picture, like a benediction, sprang into her troubled mind—those frank, honest eyes, that chivalrous protective presence—what would she not give to have Mark Cheveril with her at this difficult juncture to aid her in her persuasions, for she had not yet fathomed the abyss of trouble which seethed about her. "Why, Alfred, a parentage like that will be our pride," she went on, and her tone rang with conviction.

Her husband stared at her for an instant with a strange wistful expression in his eyes, then he shook his head and pulled his hand from her grasp.

"It's a lie," he shrieked. "A vile lie! I wouldn't touch the man with the tongs! He's not my father. You're on the wrong track altogether, Hester, it's not that. Listen and I'll whisper," he added, turning with terrified eyes to stare at the long shadows thrown by the moonlight from the shrubs encircling the gravel sweep. "I'm a hunted man. They're after me already—the police, I mean! I'm a criminal, Hester! In a mad moment I yielded to a vile temptation. The long and the short of it is that I've made myself liable to conviction for forgery. I'm ruined."

Then he narrated incoherently all that had led up to his using the Mahomedan's name.

Hester listened silently with strained eyes and a face of deadly pallor. Indeed she seemed unable to find utterance.

"Speak, Hester," wailed her husband, when he had told her all. "Don't stand staring at me like a ghost. I've come to say good-bye, Hester! I couldn't resist that. Mind, I did it for you—to get money to go to the hills, and now I'll have to flee an outcast and alone!"

"But how—where?" asked Hester in bewildered tones, as if she was only beginning to have a glimmering of the dreadful import of the revelation which she had just heard.

"Well, listen—I might dodge the police if I can get off to-night. I've got some hours in front of them still. I can't for the life of me steady my thoughts to make any plan. Hester, help me!" he wailed feebly. "I can't, I won't see the inside of an Indian jail!"

Hester's eyes dilated with horror, but she seemed unable to utter a word.

"Look here, wife, if I could only get hold of some disguise I might get off by the early train to Beypore, and go on to Karrachi and ship there. I've got a pal there who will help me, and see me through this scrape if I could only reach Beypore without being caught. Ah, but I shouldn't have told you—I should have kept that dark! Never mind now, you're my wife and you can keep a secret. Can't you plan out any make-up that would serve my turn—male or female?"

Hester's mind was already at work. She had so far grasped the desperate situation. Pain and shame gnawed at her spirit, and the unspoken wail rang in her heart, "Oh, how could he commit such a dreadful crime?" Even the query rose in her mind, "Was it right to help him?" If she did not, the issue was certain according to his own showing. When morning dawned he would be dragged off to prison. That slender body, those high strung nerves would not stand that even for a day! "O God, help me," she murmured, looking on the cowering figure of her husband. "The issues are with Thee, but surely it is for me, his wife, to help him at this terrible hour—all I can!"

"Oh, save me, Hester, save me!" implored her

"First-rate idea!" he said, springing up from his chair. "You're a genius, Hester!"

"Come then," she answered, drawing his arm through hers and leading him upstairs.

The ayah stood in readiness, holding the required garments.

"Awfully good of you, ayah," said Mr. Rayner almost lightly. "I'll send your saree back again, or better still, your missus will buy you a new one!"

The red saree was soon deftly arranged by the ayah, but when she drew back to regard her work, she shook her head.

"Ai, ai, thatt *feringhi* white face will spoil all!"

"She's right, Hester," said Rayner, fixing hopeless eyes on his wife.

Hester silently went to her *almirah*, remembering a little box of colouring powders which had been given her by a visitor to the Rectory when some charades were on foot, and her brothers had to be hastily transformed into Red Indians. She had returned the box next morning, but her friend had said, "Keep it, my dear, you may find it useful yet!" She recalled the words with a sad smile. Yes, she thought, she would find it useful now to help the flight of her husband, to whom she had not been a year married, and to save him, if possible, from being convicted as a forger!

She set about her work, executing it as skilfully as on that happy evening when she had won golden opinions for her clever imitation of the colouring of Red Indians. The old ayah forgot her misery, and fairly clapped her hands when she saw the result. Even Mr. Rayner, when he surveyed himself in the mirror after having the saree draped round his head, said with a relieved air:

"Hester, you're an angel! I declare I'll pass for an old ayah going to visit my granddaughter. Of course my lovely nut brown hue will soon wear off but it may last till I reach—ah, I mustn't mention husband. "The morning will be on us, and they'll drag me off as sure as fate."

"Listen to me, Alfred," began Hester, in a quiet firm voice. "Will you wait here for a moment? I think I have a plan, but I must go upstairs and see ayah about it. You need not fear her, she'll be quite faithful——"

"Anyhow we must risk it," he interrupted, with a ring of hope in his voice. "I'll wait, Hester, but be quick, there's not a moment to lose."

Left alone Mr. Rayner threw himself on one of the lounging chairs, then, feeling faint, he remembered that he had not tasted food for many hours.

"Shan't whisper that to her, or she'd be insisting on a good square meal, and that might cost me dear."

He made his way to the dining-room and lit one of the candles in the candelabra which stood on the table. He went to the sideboard and poured himself out a glass of brandy and drank it eagerly. The stimulant nerved him for a little, but he began to grow impatient for his wife's return.

Meanwhile Hester's brain was at work upstairs. In a whisper she had confided to her ayah that her husband must hurry off at once because he had done something bad which had been found out.

"Something veree bad," repeated the ayah, shaking her head. "Poor gentleman, what a pity it is done find out!"

"When we do wrong it is always found out by God, ayah," replied Hester. "His punishment must come unless we repent and make amends. But I feel we must give him some help. I want to dress my husband in some clothes as unlike his own as possible. Where is that saree and jacket you used to wear in the cold weather. Will you sell it to me, ayah?"

"Sell, missus? I giving, not selling. I go fetch this veree minute."

Hester then hurried downstairs quickly, divulging the plan to her husband

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"Hester, you're an angel! I declare I'll pass for an old ayah going to visit my granddaughter. Of course my lovely nut brown hue will soon wear off but it may last till I reach—ah, I mustn't mention the place, though! But I'm afraid those bare feet, though brown enough, will take badly to the road, and yet my shoes would give me away."

"But master must have ring on his toe," cried the ayah, and the kindly old woman transferred her own ring from her toe to his.

"You'll need to hurry, Alfred," said Hester. "The dawn is beginning to steal in."

When her husband caught sight of her grief-stricken face, the brief courage which his successful disguise had imparted began to give way.

"Oh, I can't do it, Hester," he moaned. "I'm not fit to go through with it. I'll rather stay and be caught, like a rat in a trap," and he threw himself down on a sofa.

Hester's brave spirit rose with the desperate crisis.

"You must carry out your plan, Alfred. It's too late to draw back now—unless it is any sense that it is wrong to go that makes you shrink? You must not let your faint heart get the upper hand," she said firmly, almost dragging him from the sofa. "Alfred, I want to say something to you," she whispered, as they went downstairs to the verandah. "Will you try to think of what you've done? It's so terrible! Will you cry to God to make you feel the shame and the sin of it all? It is never too late to seek His forgiveness. Nothing else really matters but that in the end," she said softly, and her eyes pleaded more than her words.

"You're a saint," murmured her husband, looking into her face with an awed air. "God bless you, my sweet wife! I was never worthy of you. Old Worsley was right there."

Even in her woe Hester felt surprise at these words. "He's dreaming," she thought, but the time for words was past. Not one moment longer could she allow him to linger. She urged him to go, but he threw himself into a chair.

'It's you who are sending me away," he groaned.

"I never thought it would end so. I won't be hoofed out by you like this? No, don't lay a finger on me," he cried, pushing her away as she stooped over him caressingly, as a mother might over a rebellious child. "You'll spoil my make-up if you touch me and then my only chance of escape will be gone!" After a moment he recovered himself and started up. "Look here, Hester, how could I forget? You must share in my gold—I've got plenty here," he said, pulling out one of the bags he had stowed away in the remnants of English clothing which he had retained beneath the thickly pleated folds of the red saree. "See, I'll give you half——"

"Of the money you stole!" cried his wife, with a ring of scorn in her voice. "Not a penny of it! Come what may, it must all be returned to the Mahomedan, whoever he is," she added with decision. The incident seemed to brace her thoughts, though she was conscious that the fact of her husband offering her a share of his theft emphasised the gulf between them. Something of this seemed to strike him also. He stood staring at her with misery in his eyes.

"Oh, Hester, what a hideous mess I've brought you into!" he burst forth. "But you'll not forsake me, will you? This horrid hunt for me will not last long. I'll get off scot free, never fear. We may be able to meet soon and go to England together. I'll send you word. If not together, I'll hurry there, and you'll meet me, won't you, dear?" he asked, clinging to her.

Hester started back on seeing the growing light of the sky.

"Alfred, you're forgetting the risk you run by lingering like this. You must go as long as it is possible. See, it will be day soon. Oh, do go, I implore you," she cried in terror, thinking she heard sounds in the back verandah, and almost pushing him down the steps. "I cannot let you perish! Go, go, oh, do go!"

"I fear I can't risk my make-up by an embrace," he said lightly, looking back as he began to go down the steps. But when he reached the gravel, he darted up again and threw his arms round her trembling figure, kissing her passionately; then he fled, just as the silver dawn was chasing the last shadows of night from the sky.

Hester stood a silent statuesque figure, watching her husband as he disappeared along the avenue of casuarina trees. Then her dauntless spirit gave way and she fell down in a faint.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ALFRED RAYNER in disguise, limping over the hard road with his bare brown-stained feet, and trammelled by his unwonted garb, made slow progress. At length he reached the railway station. It was empty save for a few stray passengers who had stepped out of a train which had just steamed in. He hurried to the ticket-office, and adapting his "munshi" acquired Tamil as closely as possible to the servants' patois, asked for a third-class ticket for Beypore, the clerk volunteering the information that a train was just starting.

Rayner hurried to the platform and saw some passengers, all natives, scrambling into the carriages of the waiting train with many bundles and much vociferation. He reckoned himself fortunate to secure an empty one, and seated himself on the hard bench with a relieved air.

"Off at last, and not a single pair of eyes to pry on me—or worse, thank goodness!" he muttered. "There might have been a force of police lying in wait. But who would recognise the defaulting barrister in this old hag of an ayah? I mustn't forget for one instant that I am an old ayah, or else woe betide me!"

The fugitive tried to make himself as comfortable as his circumstances would admit, resolving to secure a period of sleep and at the first break in the journey to fortify himself by a good breakfast. This, however, he feared might not be for some time seeing the train, for an express, was going at an unaccountably slow pace. Sheer exhaustion came to his aid, and he fell into a deep sleep, only to awake when the train pulled up at a station.

"Now for some breakfast, I'm desperately hungry!" he said, yawning and stretching himself with an air of satisfaction, which soon changed to bewilderment when he observed that the few passengers were all tumbling out of their respective carriages, and that the train had evidently reached its terminus.

Rubbing his eyes he peered out, perceiving to his dismay the familiar station of Puranapore. Mistaking this train for the express for Beypore, he had been carried to the place which of all others he would have wished to avoid.

"Good heavens!" he muttered, throwing himself back on the carriage bench. "And the very first person I see may be Zynool himself!" Then to his relief he remembered that, after all, he appeared as an old Hindu ayah, on whom the haughty Mussulman would not deign to look.

He slipped out of the carriage, saying to himself: "I must feign rheumatics and limp a bit!"

In spite of his confidence in his disguise, he could not help glancing furtively round. Nobody, however, seemed to be taking any account of the harmless looking old woman. In fact, there seemed to be some absorbing preoccupation filling the minds of all the bystanders. The new arrivals hung about with an air of trouble on their faces, their bundles deposited by their sides, as they listened open-mouthed to the native porters, who were expatiating volubly on some matter which was evidently of general interest. The Eurasian station-master had a worried air, and, in coming in contact with the supposed ayah, bustled her unceremoniously aside.

The question with Rayner, meanwhile, was not to discover the topic of interest, but how he could proceed to Beypore. This involved some inquiries, and he was timid in his first attempts at personating his fictitious character.

"After all, I'm not an ancient crone but a man of the world," he assured himself, as he limped towards the little shelf behind which a Eurasian boy sold dog-eared, dust-begrimed books and newspapers. He laid his hands on a time-table, and threw down the required anna in payment, then without uttering a word he withdrew to a quiet corner to study it. He found to his disappointment that only by returning to Madras could he entrain for Beypore. To the Central station he must go, that was inevitable, but at what a risk! Ever and anon during his cogitations he had to remind himself that owing to his disguise the chance of discovery was slight. Still, in the familiar precincts of the Madras station, the risk in daylight would be too great to run, besides he had not nerve for it, he decided. He must then perforce linger at Puranapore till after dark, and then take a return train which would fit in with the express for Beypore in the early morning.

To be a whole day in Puranapore was a dismal prospect, but it had to be faced. As an old ayah he could sleep away most of it in the women's third-class waiting-room. He resolved now to secure breakfast, but there were no possibilities for this in the little station. He therefore prepared to make his way out, not without some trepidation, as it was his first real experience of testing his disguise. Addressing the ticket collector who stood at the gate, he explained that he had stepped into the wrong train at Madras, being bound for Beypore, not Puranapore, and was therefore minus a ticket, but had the fare ready in his hand.

The porter replied in a kindly tone in his native tongue.

"What matters the ticket, old mother, on this day—an unlucky day for you to come to our town. We need more the soldiers than an old woman."

Rayner, in a humble voice, asked the reason of this.

"What, you don't know there's fighting and rioting between Hindus and Mahomedans afoot here since last night? It is said they are to be at it again to-night only worse. This is the Mohurrum; but like me, not being caste Hindu, you don't bother about their squabbles."

Rayner assented with a nod.

"All the same, old mother, guard your venerable bones when you get into the streets," he added.

Rayner remembered his *rôle* so well that he salaamed profoundly as he passed out, and the ticket-collector looked after him, shaking his head.

"It's a far cry from Puranapore to Beypore, poor old amah! She'd have been safer there to-day than here!"

Rayner could see from the changed appearance of the passers-by in the streets that the town was roused. There seemed also to be a large addition to the usual population. Haughty, stalwart groups of Mussulmans, evidently from the Mofussil, strode about, casting looks of hatred on the Hindus, many of whom were hurrying to close their shops and stalls, whispering ominously to each other. Even the boldest beggars rattled their gourds with less confidence than usual; and from the windows of the houses which gave on the streets he could catch glimpses of female forms looking down like startled birds. Everywhere extreme tension was visible.

"I expect they're only bottling up till nightfall," muttered Rayner. "My programme, sketched to Zynool, has evidently been adopted. Clever dog—an apt pupil, in fact! He should forgive this little blunder of mine, seeing I've proved such an excellent teacher! All the same, I little thought I was to be in at the death!"

He crept cautiously along the narrow streets in search of a bazaar where he might pick up a native repast.

"An English breakfast might give the show away," he sighed, remembering the dainty breakfast table at Clive's Road at which Hester would now be seated, but from which he was banished. Finding a stall where eatables were displayed, and cooking in progress, he crept up, asking in a humble tone for a cup of coffee, and some rice cakes. An excellent meal was provided, but after partaking of it he had to withdraw to a corner to extricate the payment from his pocket beneath the folds of his saree, so he decided to purchase one of the gay little cotton bags which he had noticed was an invariable part of the ayah's dress, and to keep some small change in it for emergencies. The bag also suggested a supply of betel-nut; for he remembered the stained lips and teeth would all go to enhance the needful "make-up." Having made his small purchases successfully, he wandered about the streets for a time, but the sun was now beating mercilessly down on his head, which was uncovered save for the muslin wrap, and his feet were beginning to be scorched and blistered by the burning pavements till he felt obliged to seek some cooler retreat.

He now made his way to the outlying portion of the town. He glanced up at the mosque as he passed it, recalling how Zynool and he had plotted that this bone of contention should be planted in close proximity to the burning-ghaut of the Hindus. Then he strolled down to the river-side, and took a closer survey of the spot than he had ever done before. Some oleanders threw out graceful branches which suggested a possibility of shade, but they afforded no shelter from the fierceness of the sun. He began to fear sunstroke if he lingered longer without cover, but to seek shelter in any house might have evil consequences.

Limping slowly along the road, he came at length to a palm-tope and threw himself on the burnt-up grass in the best shaded corner he could find. A spell of sleep soon granted him some relief. When he awoke he glanced at his watch, and was thankful to see that afternoon was approaching. Soon he could take his way to the station, but being unwilling to enter the town again he was desirous of postponing his arrival there till close on the hour of the train's departure for Madras. He decided to stray further into the jungly scrub which stretched beyond the palm-tope, and would fain have rested in the cool-looking rank grass which abounded; but Indian jungles were treacherous, teeming with insect life, not to speak of the possible lurking presence of snakes, and he did not dare to sit at ease. The shade, however, was refreshing, and he would while away the hours till the darkness fell.

For the first time since he was faced by the fear of detection he felt inclined to review his plans for escape. Self-pity entered largely into his thoughts. He regretted he had not made definite arrangements with Hester to have some needful belongings forwarded to him, and resolved to send her an unsigned memo. directing her to dispatch his dressing-boy, whom he regarded as specially faithful, with a portion of his wardrobe to Beypore. He felt a certain interest and excitement in making a list of his needs on the leaf of a scribbling book which he discovered in his pocket, though he had got rid of his pocket-book when he visited the river, fearing lest it might become a witness against him. He began to write minute directions to his wife about various matters.

"All this will need cash, of course," he muttered, "but since she was too proud to share mine, she must manage as best she can. There's still the landau and the horses and a good many assets. She may even be able to assist me with some money. As for me, I'll ship at Kurrachi as a humble ayah—a steerage passenger; then I'll watch my chance, and come off at Aden, then with the help of my bundle—I only wish I could risk my own portmanteau—I'll be able to appear as an English gentleman, and, as such, continued my journey home under an assumed name. What a blessing it will be to get out of this vile petticoat!" he wound up, impatiently extricating the end of the saree which had become involved in some straggling tendrils.

He was delighted to find how quickly the time had passed since he got his mind into working order, and decided that he might now venture to emerge from his retreat. As he stepped out to the road, a bandy passed him, but he failed to catch sight of the passenger. Presently a man on horseback intercepted the bandy, and its occupant jumped out. Rayner had no difficulty in recognising Dr. Campbell, the rider being Mark Cheveril. After a moment's parley both gentlemen continued their journey townwards, which finally decided the fugitive to turn in the opposite direction.

He had not gone far when the big Jailer, mounted on a strong brown horse, appeared, also making for the town.

"They're all agog, seemingly! Zynool hasn't been able to keep his plan of attack so secret as he ought," muttered Rayner. "But it will give them a bit of a scare anyhow!" he chuckled.

Presently two Eurasian clerks passed him on foot. In their haste one of them knocked up against him.

"Out of the way, old amah, if you don't want to be shoved down," he said, brushing past; then remarked to his companion, "I daresay the poor soul thinks she's safer on the road to-night than in the town."

Rayner followed them closely, and in the stillness of the evening air could catch fragments of their shrill conversation.

"Oh, my gracious, what a lark this is! I wonder if the Collector will come in? The Doctor thought he should, but I could see the 'Sub.' didn't want it."

"Thatt's because he wants to protect the Collector from the row. Mr. Cheveril adores him and looks after him as if he were a babee ever since his poison illness."

"Mr. Cheveril is an awfulee good sort—and to think he is one of us! I say, Mike, don't it give a fellow more heart to have him taking up our cause like thatt? Though to my eyes, he looks more an Anglo-Saxon than a Eurasian."

"Just what I told the young fool," muttered Rayner. "If only he hadn't mixed himself up with that lot, he might have passed anywhere for a pucka Englishman."

The clerks had now disappeared round a bend of the road, and the silence remained unbroken till the noise of horse's hoofs sounded behind. It was the Collector himself, riding a beautiful black mare. Rayner shrank into the shadow as much as possible, but he could see that Mr. Worsley's face looked grave, though his eyes were bright, and he managed his mettlesome steed with elegant ease.

"Why, the whole *sahib-log* has turned out," thought Rayner. "I'll give the town as wide a berth as possible, and slink up by the back streets to the station."

He walked on, congratulating himself that at least there was no risk of meeting any of the English contingent, seeing they had all gone townwards. Soon he came to the little English cantonment, as it was still called, though the military element had been withdrawn. It was not unknown to him. He had visited it and left cards on some of the residents in earlier days, before he began to intrigue with Zynool and became conscious that he was a suspected person. He liked to dwell on these days now.

"I was a fool ever to have leagued myself with a native," he sighed. "It's only brought me bad luck in the end."

He remembered, too, a pleasant afternoon he had passed as the recipient of little Mrs. Samptor's hospitality. He was trying to identify her bungalow when he heard voices. Two ladies stood talking at a gate. He was startled to recognise Mrs. Samptor's voice, but decided his best policy was to creep quietly past, sustaining his *rôle* as an old ayah in every particular.

"Don't you fear, Mrs. Campbell, Samptor will make them scuttle like sheep!" remarked one of the ladies, and Rayner had no difficulty in recognising Mrs. Samptor's sharp tones. "I say, whose ayah's that? Can't be Mrs. Goldring's—too tall! Is she yours, Mrs. Campbell?"

"No, mine went to eat rice; besides, she's quite short in comparison to that one."

"She's not the Meakin's either. I know their one. Yes, she is tall—she doesn't look the right muster for an ayah somehow. I say, what if she's a Mahomedan in disguise come to murder us all when our men are away!"

Rayner had heard too much for his peace of mind. These were no safe quarters for him. He wheeled right about and began to walk hastily towards the town again.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DRIVEN from the precincts of the English quarter by Mrs. Samptor's remarks, Mr. Rayner resolved to lurk about the jungly scrub till his train was due; but finding this retreat increasingly dreary in the gathering darkness, he felt possessed with a desire to see a little of the possible happenings in the crowded streets of the native town.

"No danger of a respectable old amah like me being molested," he assured himself. Besides, he was again feeling very hungry, and decided that he must try to secure an evening meal.

On emerging from the wood, he noticed with surprise that the darkening sky was becoming suffused by a reddish glow, and suddenly a tongue of flame shot up from the town.

"They're firing something! Surely it's not the mosque? The Mahomedans will be beside themselves with fury. By Jove! I only hope it's Zynool's house —and him in it!" muttered Rayner with a chuckle.

A wild chorus of shouts and shrieks was now borne on the still evening air, and more flames leapt up into the sky.

"I declare I'm tempted to creep a little nearer and see the fun! Not a soul will heed an old woman in the scrimmage!"

Rayner began to walk on steadily as fast as his unshod feet would carry him. When he reached the narrow streets of the old town, he found that all were literally packed with human beings. It was a weird though picturesque scene, the rich variegated colours of the Eastern robes and turbans making a seething mass, lit up by many waving torches, jostling and pressing on one another in a state of wild ferment. One of the Mahomedan processions had come in contact with a company of Hindus who, with much tom-toming and blowing of conchs, were trying to make their way to the riverside to perform the burning ceremonies of a dead dhobie woman, and were using the occasion to incite their rivals by every means in their power. Some conspirators had fired the mosque, which was not long in bursting into flame. The rage of the Mahomedans knew no bounds when they saw their holy place being ruthlessly destroyed by the devouring flames. The lurid light from the blaze was shed upon the combatants in their fierce conflict.

Rayner crept on to the outskirts of the struggling mass. Through the smoke and glare he presently caught sight of some figures on horseback, who seemed to be trying to stem the onset of the foes. The Jailer's square shoulders were visible as he moved hither and thither, seeking to inspire the craven native police with some zeal and courage in the performance of their duty. Then he obtained a glimpse of Mark Cheveril, on foot, in grips with an evil-looking Hindu, whom he had caught in the act of throwing a Mussulman child into the burning mosque, not the only one permitted to perish on that fearful night. This Hindu would commit no more murders that evening, for the Jailer was now superintending his being manacled and led off to custody. Then Rayner perceived the Collector in the thick of the fight. He was still on horseback, and at the moment was trying to stem the advance of a party of desperate Mahomedans, who were advancing with weapons of destruction on a surging mass of Hindus.

The Mahomedans came on with yells of "Deen! Deen! They have defiled our holy house! They have burned our mosque! Our children have been flung to the flames! Deen! Deen!"

"Ha, Worsley's going to catch it at last!" muttered

Rayner, in growing excitement. "His Mussulman lambs will prove too much for him!"

The Collector was alternately addressing the crowd in fluent Hindustani and Tamil, his face transfigured by intense emotion, the whole spirit of the British Raj flashing in his eyes. With one hand he restrained his restive mare, the other was raised as he called now in Tamil to the Hindus:

"Back, men, back! To your homes, every man of you!"

Then, turning to the assaulting mob again, he called in their own tongue: "Mussulmans, your wrongs will be righted. Rely on the sword of justice. Take not vengeance into your own hands. If one of you advance a step it will be through my body!"

A murmur of something like admiration and assent ran through the serried mass. The fierce, dark faces in the foremost ranks softened as they watched the intrepid figure, and listened to his ringing words; but others behind still pressed forward with cries of "Deen! Deen!"

Rayner was surprised that at this critical juncture, when the surging crowd threatened to overpower him, the Collector found the presence of mind to look at his watch. He soon understood the reason. A great shout suddenly arose from the Hindus, who were swarming up from the river to the railway station, some having fled there in the hope of finding a refuge from the Mahomedan fury; and through the parting crowd he now descried "the thin red line." Yes, it was a detachment of British soldiers from Fort St. George that had been requisitioned by the Collector, mainly at Mark Cheveril's urgent representations. He was relieved now that he had permitted the telegraphic request to summon them, and had been consulting his watch to see if they were due.

On swept the gallant red-coats, greeted by cheers both from Mahomedans and Hindus, each claiming that they had come to be their defenders. Jubilant shouts rent the air, though by some they were undistinguishable from the resounding yells of the rioters. One of these with his party was now making his way up the street at the corner of which Alfred Rayner happened to be standing.

"Ha!" he laughed. "Here comes Zynool. He's not going to be cowed by the Collector. Now we shall have some fun!"

The Mahomedan was mounted on a huge horse, which Rayner at once recognised as one of his own Australians. It was a powerful animal and stood higher than the Collector's Arab, and was evidently too fresh from want of exercise. It champed at its foam-bespattered bit, and tossed its head, seeming to resent Zynool's tight rein.

"Didn't think a native could have managed Abdul so well!" thought Rayner, as he looked with admiration on the portentous rider, who was made more colossal in size by reason of the padded green coat he had donned in spite of the heat.

He was flanked by a following of his own people. Someone behind him rode the other Australian, and it was evident that neither Zynool nor his party were in a mood to receive any check from the Collector.

Owing to the pressure in front, the riders were forced back, so that quite unexpectedly Rayner found himself in closer proximity to his enemy than he quite relished. He began to push back, trying to disappear round the corner into the street at right angles to the one in which he stood, when a terrified Hindu, seeking to clear a passage for himself, all at once thrust him forward, till he almost fell against the Australian horse and its rider.

"Out of my way, you old Hindu sow," growled Zynool, kicking the supposed ayah.

"Have a care, sahib," said a more kindly bystander, "she's only an old ayah. Go home, old woman, this is no place for you!"

Zynool cast a glance on the cowering form, thinking he had done it more injury than he had meant. The light from one of the oil-lamps fell sheer on Rayner's face. In a moment the plethoric voice of the Mahomedan changed to a low, hissing sound.

"Thou! Thou! Trapped, by Allah! This is a prize better than any Hindu!"

For an instant, Rayner gazed on the man he had wronged with terror-stricken eyes, then he made a desperate plunge to strike away. Zynool saw the movement, and determining his prey should not escape, he urged his horse forward and deliberately set it to trample down his enemy, who fell before the onset and made no attempt to rise.

"Seize him! Seize him!" cried Zynool to the men on foot behind him, though indeed he had already made sure his enemy could not escape. "It's no ayah, 'tis mine enemy, La'yer Rayner!"

In spite of his disguise, the face of the fugitive was not difficult to recognise, for the heat of the day had partially erased the stain which Hester's fingers had so cleverly applied.

There was, however, one witness of the scene unsuspected by Zynool. The Assistant-Collector's eye had been upon the Mahomedan ever since he appeared in the fray, knowing him to be one of the most dangerous of the agitators, and fearing lest he should approach the Collector. His attention had been attracted some minutes previously by the old ayah in the red saree standing at the street corner; he wondered what she did there at such a time. Suddenly, to his horror, he saw the Mahomedan on his great horse deliberately charge her, knock her down, and ruthlessly trample on her prostrate form.

He did not hesitate a moment. Forcing his way through, he seized the horse's bridle.

"Zynool Sahib, dismount," he commanded, with flashing eyes. "I am witness to your felling down that old woman. I put you under arrest. Dismount, I say."

To his surprise, Zynool meekly prepared to obey, and with the assistance of one of his party reached the ground. The man who had been ordered to drag away the unconscious form of the ayah stood riveted to the spot on the appearance of the English sahib.

"I would speak one word," said Zynool, coming close to Mark Cheveril's ear. "'Tis no ayah, 'tis La'yer Rayner, a forger, flying from justice in a woman's petticoats. See, sahib, if I speak not the truth!"

Mark felt impelled to draw a step nearer the prostrate form while Zynool stood watching his every movement with a sardonic expression. He bent over the huddled heap in the red saree, and recognised the face of Hester's husband. Almost at the same moment, one of the natives caught sight of the white knees under the disordered draperies and burst into a loud laugh.

"A *feringhi*, by the holy Prophet! Not an ayah at all!"

A dozen voices around echoed in amazement, "A *feringhi?*" Zynool looked on with silent contempt.

It was a terrible moment for Mark Cheveril, but his presence of mind did not forsake him. He felt the call to be paramount even when so much else was at stake. He raised his voice and shouted: "Samptor!"

The Jailer heard the call above the discordant yells around him. Fearing that the Assistant was in danger, he forced his way to him, his stalwart limbs standing him in good stead.

"I give this man in charge," said Cheveril sternly, pointing to Zynool, whose countenance became black with rage and fear. "Saw him with my own eyes trample down this—this victim," he added, pointing to the motionless form at his feet.

Leaving Zynool in the strong grip of the representative of authority, Mark turned his attention to the injured man. A stretcher was hastily improvised from the remains of an outside shutter that dangled from a window hard by. Two Hindus who recognised the Assistant-Collector volunteered their help. Lifting the prostrate form, they carried it to the Dispensary, which, fortunately, was at the end of the street, and more fortunately still, the cavalcade was met by Dr. Campbell. The place was already full of the wounded brought in from the fray. A brief explanation sufficed, and Rayner's helpless form was carried to a mattress in a corner of the large room.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"THIS is horrible, Cheveril!" said Dr. Campbell, bending over his patient. "Every bit of him is mangled except his head. Poor chap, it seems like the work of a beast of prey."

"So it was, Campbell, a human beast of prey! I actually saw Zynool force his horse on him, knock him down, and make it trample on his fallen body," whispered Mark, his eyes still full of the horror of the scene.

"But how in the world did Rayner come to be in the guise of a native woman, I should like to know? Did he come to assist the Mussulmans, do you think? I know he's been intriguing with that villain Zynool. Perhaps he wanted to see the fruits of his handiwork, *incognito*."

"No, I fear it was more than that. Zynool muttered something I only half understood," returned Mark with a troubled air. "They had quarrelled, evidently, and Zynool indicated that Rayner was a fugitive from justice. I only hope it's not true!"

"Well, in a way it don't matter now—not to him, at least, poor fellow. Every organ is smashed. He's living still, though,—his heart's flickering. Brandy, Tobias," called the doctor to his Eurasian dresser.

A few drops of the stimulant diluted with water were passed between the blanched lips. "We'll cut away those red rags," said the doctor, and adroitly set to work. Presently Rayner was divested of his disguise. Finding his watch and one or two papers in his pocket, and his store of gold, the doctor handed them to Mark; and after having arranged as best he could for the comfort of the patient, he was called away to other urgent cases.

Mark, on his knees beside the low pallet, continued to watch the stricken man in the dim light. The dresser had brought a sponge and carefully washed the stained face, and the ashen features gleamed like those of a marble profile.

"What a perfectly beautiful face it is!" murmured Mark to himself. "Yet it lacks strength of character." All at once he recalled the pictured face of Mr. Morpeth's wife which Hester and he had examined that happy afternoon, in which she had seen a likeness to her husband. "A wonderful resemblance! I can see it now, and just that same something lacking." His thoughts now strayed to Hester, and the trouble hovering over her in this terrible disaster. Trying and unstable as this man had proved, the shock and horror of this event would mark a terrible crisis in her young life. He recalled her query, evidently wrung from a sore heart that morning at St. Thomas' Mount. Would the Master's shaping process be always sharp and painful and inscrutable—the tools He used sometimes making the poor quivering heart bleed? A sore answer was coming to that question.

Mark's reverie was now disturbed by the approach of the doctor. He was showing signs of excitement, and he stooped down and lilted low: "The Campbells are coming, hurrah, hurrah! The Campbells are coming, hurrah!"

"I know," nodded Mark quietly. "I saw the first of them appearing just at the moment this happened. Otherwise I doubt if even the claim of this poor fellow should have brought me from my post. The Collector's all right, is he?"

"As right as a trivet, and in great spirits. Rioters on both sides scuttling like rabbits. The police-peons are now, at last, busy making arrests and Samptor's striding about like an avenging fate! They've got

Zynool—not without a struggle. However, he is nabbed, and the warrant out to search his house at once. Mootuswamy Moodliar has seen to that. It will be the Andamans for him, without doubt. The streets will soon be empty. The soldiers are to camp here for the night, but the danger's over. Here, alas, we have the worst result of the riot," said the doctor, glancing round on the rows of wounded men, many of them crying out in pain, others beyond any expression of their misery.

"Look, Campbell," said Mark, his eyes eagerly fixed on Rayner's face. "Isn't there some sign of returning consciousness here?"

A slight tremor passed through the mangled frame, the eyelids quivered and opened, and Rayner fixed his eyes on Mark's face for a moment, then closed them again. Presently, however, Mark found his large, lustreless eyes resting steadily upon him. The broken man made an effort to speak, but the voice was so low and faint it was difficult to catch the words.

"Cheveril!—It is you—thought I was dreaming—where am I? In Zynool's house—I remember. He spotted me—drove his horse on me—my own Australian too. He's done for me, Cheveril—every limb—game's up—nothing matters now——"

His voice died away, but after a moment he roused himself and fixed his eyes on the pitying face bending over him. "Kind, by Jove! I saw you—before Zynool—went for me."

"Don't be afraid, Rayner, this is not Zynool's house. It's the hospital, you're all right here," said Mark, taking his limp hand.

"You brought me here—kind—I'll tell Hester." His lips parted in a feeble smile, then his face became convulsed. "Never see Hester again," he moaned. "It's all up, Cheveril—I'm hunted—you'll not let them take me—you'll not give me up——?"

"Don't trouble, Rayner. You're quite safe here," said Mark soothingly. "The doctor's bringing something to ease you." He laid his hand on the long, thin fingers, and stroked them gently.

"Now, my dear fellow," said the doctor cheerfully, "this ought to help you a bit." He administered an opiate. Soon the eyelids drooped, and sleep visited the dying man.

Mark kept unremitting vigil beside the low mattress through the long hours of the night. At length there was a slight movement; he could see by the light of the flickering oil-lamp overhead that the eyes of the sufferer were open and turned to him. Hoping he might fall asleep again he made no response. Then a hand was feebly stretched out to him.

"Yes, I'm here, Rayner! Mark Cheveril—close beside you."

"I know—I know—good—kind—Hester's friend." After a pause he seemed to wish to speak again, though the effort was painful.

"One night I stood by her cot—in her dreams she murmured—'the false and the true.' It seemed a home thrust—I felt furious at the time. Cheveril—I've been the false—I see it now. You are the true—you'll understand better—when you know." His face again became convulsed with emotion, and Mark bent over him with pity in his eyes, unable to utter a word.

The first streak of the dawn began to steal through the open windows.

"Ha, the daylight will be upon us, Hester," cried Rayner, with strange clearness of tone. He tried to move. A terrible spasm seized him. Mark called for the doctor, but before he came the sufferer was quiet again and seemed to be sleeping. The doctor stooped over him.

"He's gone, Cheveril," he said quietly. "Your watch is ended. It was only a question of hours. Death has been merciful in releasing him so speedily."

The silver dawn was brightening into day when Mark Cheveril and the weary doctor stood together at the door of the dispensary—Dr. Campbell to snatch a few moments rest at home after the labours of the night; Mark Cheveril to set out with a heavy heart to Madras.

"You'll look in on the Collector after breakfast, Campbell, and see that he's all right, after last night. I say, didn't he do splendidly?" asked Mark, with a light coming into his tired eyes.

"Oh, for the matter of that, some other people did splendidly too! I saw your tussle over that child with that brute of a Hindu. It was refreshing, Cheveril; only, I felt sorry he was a Hindu, and not a Mahomedan. Anyhow, I'm bound to say, the Collector held the balance even when put on his mettle. I expect all this will act as a thunderstorm and clear the atmosphere. We'll be well rid of Zynool and some of his crew. Yes, I'll look in for a moment and see Worsley. Any message? I forget if he knew Rayner? Of course I'll tell him of the tragedy, and of your share in it."

Mark, on thinking of it, felt relieved that he would not be the bearer of the tidings of the terrible fate of the man he knew the Collector had good reason to dislike. He was conscious that in Mr. Worsley's feelings there would be a sense of relief when he heard of the swift release which this tragedy would bring to the young wife whom he had liked and pitied. For his own part, the knowledge of that release brought no lightening as yet to his sad thoughts. Through the long hours of the past night he had come face to face with a great experience. He had watched "a human soul take wing," and the sense of it being a "fearful thing" to see was very present with him. So heavily did it lie on his heart, he had no thought for aught else; and to Hester, he knew the awful news must bring unutterable pain. To know that the man with whom she had embarked on life's voyage—though he had proved not "one to ride the water with," as the saying is—had been tragically engulfed, would indeed prove a crushing blow. How could he, just because he was so full of comprehending sympathy, be the one to carry the news to the wife that their bark had foundered in dark, treacherous waters, and that he who should have been the mainstay was lost in the whirlpool ?

More and more did he shrink from the task before him as the train carried him to Madras.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

As Mark Cheveril was stepping out of the railway carriage in the Madras station, a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"The very man I was anxious to meet this morning," said Mr. Morpeth, fixing his deep grey eyes on his young friend. "In fact, it was my anxiety about all of you at Puranapore that brought me here at this hour. I heard rumours yesterday of an impending riot in the town. Then I had a bad dream! I haven't actually visited the place for years, but I saw you all with a furious mob round you, and big champing horses riding over you. I feared you and Mr. Worsley might be in trouble. But I'm glad to see you're all safe, anyhow, Cheveril. But you do look a bit jaded. Has the rioting been serious? Come and tell me all about it."

The old man put his arm through Mark's, and walked down the platform with him.

"Serious enough," answered Mark. "But a company of soldiers from the Fort soon settled the rioters. It's an unexpected event connected with the riot that has brought me here this morning. You'll be sorry to hear, Morpeth, that our friend, Mrs. Rayner's husband, has been killed—literally trampled to death by a savage Mahomedan on horseback."

"Alfred dead!" gasped Mr. Morpeth, with a look of grief and terror in his eyes. He stumbled in his walk, and but for Mark's strong arm would have fallen forward.

His companion regarded him with astonishment.

"Yes, Rayner's gone, poor fellow! It's very sad!

This sudden bad news will be terrible for his wife. I didn't think you knew him though ?" added Mark interrogatively. "I'm just on my way to break the news to her if I can muster up courage. I've been watching by him all night—he passed away at dawn."

"God bless you for that," murmured Mr. Morpeth, his face quivering. "Cheveril, there's no need to keep the secret any longer. I was wrong to keep it at all. It was the ruin of him. He was my only son—Alfred." Then in reply to Mark's silent start, he added, "Yes, that was his mother's portrait you and his wife came on that afternoon. The incident struck me at the time. I would I had spoken even then."

"Rayner—your son ? It's hardly believable," stammered Mark, suddenly recalling the incident of his first evening in Madras, when Rayner in the mail-phaeton had, it seemed to him, almost deliberately set himself to trample down the old man on whose cheek the tears were now running down in sorrow for his loss. "He did not know this, of course—he never knew it ?" burst forth Mark, in an almost pleading tone.

"Yes, Alfred did know he was my son—but not in time—not till lately," the father acknowledged in a faltering voice. "I should like to tell you all about it, Cheveril. And from you, who have stood by his dying bed, there is much I want to hear."

Mark assented, and tightening his arm on Mr. Morpeth's, he led him to a quiet corner of the big station, where they could carry on a conversation without interruption. He would fain have suggested that he should take the old man to the peace of his own library, but he felt his first duty was to her who had been the beloved and sheltered one of Pinkthorpe Rectory, and who was now alone and forlorn in this alien land.

In broken words David Morpeth told his tale of many-sided pain. Mark Cheveril's sympathetic heart read its import even more completely than the speaker guessed, though his words were few. After a little silence, he glanced at the clock, saying:

"I was on my way to Clive's Road to tell her. Do you think——"

"Ah, yes, it is for me to take that duty," said Mr. Morpeth, starting up from the bench where they were sitting. "I've shirked my responsibilities too long. I see it now when it is too late. I shall go to that sweet child whom I have loved for her own sake as my daughter."

The proposal was eagerly hailed by Mark, who now began to consider whether he would share Zynool's communication with the stricken father, but decided that before doing so he would seek fuller information, and arranged to meet Mr. Morpeth at his house an hour or two later. He was desirous of returning to Puranapore as soon as possible, not only on account of his arrears of work, but also that he might through Zynool even in prison ascertain the charge that was brought against Rayner, which, on his own acknowledgment, had made him a fugitive in disguise.

After seeing Mr. Morpeth into his little victoria, Mark drove to the Club, having much food for thought as he pondered over the tragical story to which he had listened; and which, as he linked on certain incidents which sprang to his memory with painful vividness, obliged him to acknowledge the utter baseness of Hester's husband.

When Mr. Morpeth alighted from his carriage at Clive's Road and walked up the broad steps, he caught sight of Hester seated in the verandah, looking like a ghost of her former self.

"The poor child must have heard already," he said to himself, as he went forward. Even the sound of the carriage wheels seemed to have struck terror into Hester's heart. She clung to the arms of her chair as she essayed to rise, and looked at her visitor with scared, questioning eyes.

"You know already, then?" murmured Mr.

Morpeth, taking her hand and gazing pitifully into her face.

"Oh, have they caught him? Is he in prison?" she cried, the blood rushing into her pale cheeks. "Oh, I can't bear it!"

"In prison, my dear? What do you mean?" asked Mr. Morpeth in a bewildered tone. "No, Hester, death is not prison! Pray that in spite of all it may be the Gate of Life."

"'Death'! Have you come to tell me that my husband is dead?" she asked with startled air.

Mr. Morpeth briefly narrated to her the events of which Mark Cheveril had put him in possession at the station. Hester listened, dry-eyed, as one spell-bound.

"And Hester," he added slowly, "I prayed that I might bring this news to you because I am Alfred's father——"

"You are? Then it *was* true!" cried Hester, as if awakening from a dream. "But oh, why did not poor Alfred have all the good a father like you might have been to him? I thought these women who told me were only gossiping, but I even wished that it *were* true. Why did you ever lose hold of your son?" asked Hester, looking reproachfully on the worn, grey face.

So it happened, that for the second time that morning, David Morpeth, with aching heart, had to take up the tangled skein of the past. And Hester, as she listened, with her quick perception easily filled up the gaps in the narration.

"Oh, the loss to him!" she murmured. "If he had been brought up by one good and true like you he might have been different, instead of being embittered, reckless, mad."

In her turn, she had to unfold to the father the story of his son's crime and the fear of its consequences, which had driven him from his home, a fugitive from justice.

The father's grey head was bowed in grief. He sat in silence for some time, then looking up with a sob he said:

"If he had only come to me—even that night. I was his father—but he would have none of me."

"But how could he go to you—he did not know," faltered Hester.

"Ah, child, that is the worst sorrow of all—Alfred did know," said the truth-loving man, looking at Hester with his earnest eyes.

"Not that evening on the beach when he was so rude—so cruel?" Oh, say he did not know then?"

Hester's eyes as well as her tone pleaded for an assurance that at least she could exonerate her husband from the terrible stain such knowledge must shed on his conduct that evening.

"How can I tell her," he thought. "Listen, my child! When Alfred was in Calcutta he learnt that David Morpeth, the old East Indian, was his father. He disowned me and scornfully refused my allowance to him from that day forward. As I have explained to you, it was my own fault for weakly consenting to a foolish promise—for allowing my child to pass from me as I did. The fact is my own will inclined to it. I had always been too sensitively conscious of the disabilities of Eurasians—perhaps unduly dominated by the aristocracy of colour in the white man. Mr. Cheveril, now, has turned those very disabilities which were my weakness into strength, but I bent my head before the prejudice, having suffered in many-sided ways from my youth up. To shield my son against it seemed in my mistaken judgement worthy of the sacrifice I had to make. I desired to save him from the cup that had been so bitter to my taste, forgetting that the cup Our Father offers is the only safe one for us. I dreamt too of his having a very different training in England, idealising everything there, as I did in those days. I thought no sacrifice too great to bring about this end; but my wife's sister thwarted my purposes and even deceived me for long. Ignorant as

I was of English ways save through literature, I shrank from going there to arrange matters for my son until it was too late. I have long known, however, that it was not only my foolish promise to the dead mother that bound me—it was my own pride and self-will. Long ago, of course, I saw the fatal mistake I had made. But we have to reap as we sow. My reaping time is sore indeed. Oh, the bitterness to think of his being a forger and a felon."

With a groan the old man bent his head and covered his face with his hands. Hester's pity, even at this her own dark hour, was stirred for the forlorn man. She rose and laid her hand on his grey head.

"Try to forgive him," she murmured. "It is terrible to think of, but Alfred is dead. We must try not to judge him hardly any more."

The pathetic ring in her voice caused the old man to look up at her.

"You have suffered too, my child," he said, taking her hand. "Have I not been a silent witness of your trials—haunted by the thought of them even when I went about my daily work? How I longed to spare you, to protect you. Now, at last, in that matter I can have my wish," he added, with a touch of his old energy coming into his face. "As Alfred's father, it is my right to do all I can to help and protect you at this terrible time. The responsibility will be my greatest comfort now. First, may I go and ask your good friend Mrs. Fellowes to come and be with you?"

"No, no, just for to-day let me be alone. There is such a thing as getting acquainted with grief, you know," returned Hester, with a sad smile.

"As you will, my dear! Then, I should like to tell you that all the offices for the dead will be my care. You will let me have my son just once in his father's house?" he asked, in a pleading tone. "It is my purpose to take him to Calcutta and lay him beside his young mother. And you, Hester, will want to return to your happy home? You have youth and hope still with you. It is no doubt your wish to go back to England ?"

"Oh, yes, I shall go home. He needs me no more. I did try to help him—but——" She broke off with a sob.

"Didn't I see you did ? Ah, how my heart yearned for you as well as for my poor wayward son ! But I was powerless to help either the one or the other. That was my punishment. But now you must allow me to atone for it by giving you all the help I can."

"When he is with you on the sea, I shall go on my voyage too. I cannot stay in this house longer —or anywhere else in this place."

"Nor need you. All can be arranged. Can you be ready to start in a couple of days ?"

"Easily. Everything here must be left to pay the debts we owe—that money he took too. I can only give up everything I have. It's not much, I fear, but it's all I can do just now. When I get home, my father——"

"Not a word about that matter," interrupted Mr. Morpeth, rising. "These burdens are all my right now. I must go, but I shall look in again this evening, since you prefer to be alone to-day. Go and lie down, my child, you are overwrought," he added, glancing at Hester's worn face.

Beckoning to the butler, he briefly told him of his master's death, and charged him to see well to his mistress, who would soon have to cross "the black water" again. Then, with his habitual calm taking possession of him once more, Mr. Morpeth hurried away to face a more difficult and trying day than Hester had any idea of.

She too had her hours of storm and stress as the long, hot hours wore on. The terrible tension arising from the suspense was now at an end. Her weak, erring husband had gone to another Bar than the earthly one she had so dreaded for him. Her brief married life lay in ruins, and though love was dead,

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its spectre haunted her at every turn. Now it was the beautiful face, the impassioned eyes of the almost unknown suitor in the Woodglade arbour that rose before her. Again, it was one incident after another disclosing his disordered heart; scenes before which she had learnt to quail in fear—not for herself, she soon learnt to outlive that—but for the restless, unhappy one to whom she had pledged her wedded troth. Sometimes it was the recollection of that morning on which he had spoken such insulting words to his own father that sprang into her mind. And as she vividly recalled the scene, she began to wonder if, all along, Alfred could have had some subconscious glimmering of the close relationship between him and the noble-hearted man he was spurning which goaded him to a sense of desperation. Then the memory of her happy morning ride with Mark Cheveril came to her mind. How kind, how comforting, how high-toned and self-restrained he had ever proved, and yet, for her sake, he had to endure taunts which, had they been flung at him by any other than her husband, she felt sure would have been dealt with very differently. Yet it had been that friend who had smoothed the dying pillow of her disgraced husband!

Deeply grateful as she was to Mark Cheveril for all that he had been to her, she felt no desire to meet him on this dark day, and was thankful that Mr. Morpeth, and not he, had been the messenger of the evil tidings. Perhaps Mark and she would never meet again in this world; yet between them she felt there would ever be the bond forged during these eventful months when faith and honour and fealty had called her to turn from the true man to him whom she had too late awakened to find deeply false, although he was the husband of her youth.

Even the thought of the home-going—that thought so thrilling to the hearts of Anglo-Indians—brought no lightening to Hester's load of pain that day, nor for many a succeeding one.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Mr. Morpeth returned to Clive's Road in the evening as he had promised, to tell Hester all he thought needful for her to hear, withholding much which might have added to her pain. He had already secured a passage for her on the first homeward bound steamer, and for her ayah, who he insisted should accompany her. He had also arranged his own sad journey to Calcutta for the same morning.

On the following days, Mrs. Fellowes proved invaluable in all preparations for the departure from Clive's Road. She observed with much concern that Hester seemed in a sort of stupor and forbore to obtrude her sympathy. She had as yet exchanged but few words with her friend, and when she had occasion to ask some needful question Hester would reply mechanically.

She sat now at the evening hour by her friend's side in the verandah, glancing anxiously at the listless, folded hands, the wan face, and the dry, despairing eyes gazing up at the dark blue star-strewn sky as if seeing strange visions. Happening to meet Mrs. Fellowes' inquiring glance, Hester stretched out her hand to clasp hers.

"How good you have been to me!" she murmured, "and so patient!" Then she added, as if in explanation. "I can't speak of it yet. I don't seem able even to feel. My heart seems shrivelled up. I am like something ayah showed me this morning. She was asking me which of her possessions she must take across the black water, and I could only think of one at the moment—a gay-coloured new leathern bottle she had once showed to me with pride. She went and fetched it from her godown and said: 'See, missus, what that bottle done come to!' and she held up a black, shrunken thing that had been hanging in the smoke of her godown since I came to Madras. I think that bottle and my heart have had the same history these last months. Both have been shrivelled in the smoke of scorching fires!"

"Why, there's a verse in the Psalms like that," said Mrs. Fellowes briskly, glad that the silence had been broken. She took her little old Bible from her bag. "Here it is, in the longest Psalm, and a very graphic description the Psalmist gives of himself. 'I am become like a bottle in the smoke.' He must have felt like that too, dear child, but if we read further we'll find how he turned to the Healer—the Restorer, till he was able to say, 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted.'"

Hester did not speak at once. "Thank you, dear friend," she said at length, and Mrs. Fellowes could see that the torpid air had passed, that life and thought had come back. "You have done me good! I think I see a little through the smoke now. I shall go and give Rosie a last lesson after all," she added, rising. "It is so good of you to promise to take care of the little maid till ayah comes back again. No more Mrs. Harbottles," she added, with something of her old bright smile.

"Yes, the smoke will rub off by degrees," thought Mrs. Fellowes, as she looked after Hester's retreating figure. "This terrible experience must leave its mark. 'A bottle in the smoke' she has been truly all her days here! Thank God the process has not been soiling! What life must have been with such a husband it passes me to understand! He hadn't a single redeeming point—except his good looks; and the Colonel even questions them. But poor Rayner had a beautiful face there is no doubt."

In the early dawn next morning Hester took farewell of her wedded home, bestowing a kindly smile on the sad-faced company of servants who were grouped round the verandah to make their last salaams to the sweet English lady whose husband had come by such an evil fate.

Many kindly notes of condolence had reached her those last days from her numerous acquaintances of varying degrees of intimacy, for Mrs. Rayner had been an esteemed member of the little Anglo-Indian society of the past season—even by some who were inclined to look askance on her husband. Now the place that had known her those short months of her wedded life would know her no more. Her memory would pass in the changing society of the Indian town like the passage of a swift flying bird through a lighted chamber. Even as she gazed at the familiar scene, the stately buildings, the towering Fort of St. George that skirted the shore while she was being carried over the waves by the stalwart brown rowers of the Massulah boat, she felt as if her life on that strand was already beginning to recede dream-like from her vision.

The surf was crossed now, and Hester and her little party, consisting of Colonel and Mrs. Fellowes, were safely landed on the deck of the *El Dorado*. Mr. Morpeth had been inventive in all kindly arrangements for the young widow, and their parting was memorable to both. His grey eyes had gazed with unutterable sorrow and tenderness into her face as he held her hands.

"This land of ours will call you again, I feel sure, my daughter; whether I am here to see it or not. One day you will return to work for our people once more."

Hester had pleaded for a promise that he should come on a visit to Pinkthorpe, knowing well that her father and mother would honour the noble Eurasian gentleman; but Mr. Morpeth shook his head, smiling sadly. "No, my child, my visit to England would be thirty years too late now." But still Hester would not hear of being robbed of all hope that it might still be one of the happy events which the future had in store for her. Colonel and Mrs. Fellowes were to be home for good the following year, so that the strong link forged with these friends was not long to be severed.

There was one true friend whose hand Hester would fain have grasped, one pair of frank eyes into which she would have wished to look once more before she finally left this place of mingled memories ; but Mark Cheveril had made no sign. He evidently did not desire to meet Alfred Rayner's wife again after all that had come and gone. She did not wonder that he felt so, but the knowledge of his kind offices to her dead husband would always be graven on her heart, and she had wished just once to put her hand in his and whisper her thanks.

A few minutes before the last bell rang her wish was realised, for she caught sight of her trusty comrade coming up the ladder. He came forward to greet her with grave earnest courtesy. There was not time for many words. The last bell was about to ring, and all, except intending passengers, were ordered to leave the ship. Colonel and Mrs. Fellowes made their farewells with looks of encompassing affection. Then Hester turned to Mark, who stood pale and repressed, a sad smile on his lips.

"I only wish I were going to Pinkthorpe too," he said. "But we shall meet there some day, I hope," he added, gazing at her wan face.

"So you will come, even after all ?" she murmured. "Till then, Mark, I will keep my thanks for all your kindness, and for all your loving care of him—I have heard—Mr. Morpeth told me," she whispered, laying her hand in his.

In another moment he was gone, and was hurrying down the ladder to join the Massulah boat.

Hester stood watching the rocking craft which carried her friends across the surf. The newly risen sun was shedding its golden light on the great rolling waters of the Bay of Bengal, and on the noble buildings skirting the shore which were glittering like fabled marble palaces under its bright rays. Beyond stretched vistas of stately trees all tinged by the glow, intersected by many a winding road and leafy compound where the scattered denizens of Madras camped during their exile. Many spots were dear and familiar to Hester. Now the vision of the desolate house in Clive's Road rose before her; the early days which seemed to promise as bright and fair as the golden dawn. Then the shattered hopes, the wrecked life, all passed in procession before her dimmed eyes as the familiar shores receded from her view, like the vanishing wake of the great steamer's track as it ploughed its way through the glistening waters.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Two years after the eventful morning of her departure from Madras, Hester was seated one afternoon in her favourite nook in the Rectory garden. The painful past had not failed to leave its traces on the deep-hearted girl. The gaiety, the "laughing light" of youth was changed to soberer hues. But the unnatural reserve which at first seemed to paralyze her had been replaced by a quiet shining peace of heart, a rare power of sympathy for others, and an inventiveness in ministering to those in sorrow. This spiritual beauty seemed reflected in face and form. There was a perfection of unconscious grace about every movement, and though the English roses on her cheeks, of which her husband had been so proud, had faded, the tender bloom of health was not lacking in her soft colouring and clear, earnest eyes. The black clinging dress which she still wore suited well her fair wavy hair as she sat bending over her book.

After the first year of mourning, to her parents' satisfaction, Hester was not unwilling to take part in the social life round her. Visitors had come and gone who had been dearly welcome to her in a way that none can understand who have not been part of "an alien land on a foreign strand," knit together by many common memories. The coming of Colonel and Mrs. Fellowes had been a great joy to her; while, to her mother, it had proved an opportunity of hearing some pages from that short year of wedded life which had hitherto been folded away even from the eyes of those nearest to the young widow.

Hester had taken up all her daughterly duties with quiet faithfulness, proving a cheerful companion to her younger brothers in their holidays, though Charlie was conscious of a change. More than once, for instance, when he had tried to elicit some news of his friend, Mark Cheveril, Hester seemed to grow dreamy and preoccupied, changing the topic as soon as possible. He decided that there must have been a coldness between these two friends.

"I don't wonder," he remarked to his mother. "If Rayner was half what old Colonel Fellowes told me of him, Cheveril couldn't have stood him; so naturally there was a rift between Hester and him."

Mrs. Bellairs, whatever her thoughts were, proved almost as reticent as her daughter. More than one suitor had sought the hand of the young widow, but Hester's quick, firm decision had always been adverse to their hopes. "She will never marry again," acquaintances agreed. Only her mother, though she gave no opinion, thought she knew some one who might one day be able to persuade her daughter to allow him to replace the house of sand which had crumbled away, by a fair house founded on a rock of true love. But she kept her own counsel.

As the days went on nothing transpired which gave any clue to what the future might bring. No letter from Mark Cheveril ever reached the Rectory now; but Hester had still one link with her short wedded life which she clung to. Many a thin blue page crossed the sea, dated from an address unknown to the fashionable residents in Madras. And these letters were responded to by gracious, loving words which gladdened the heart of the lonely man, and not only his, they were often shared with one whom long since Mr. Morpeth had come to regard as a son.

"Mr. Cheveril is the most be-fathered man I know," declared little Mrs. Samptor. "He is the well-beloved boy of our surly Collector and the precious son of

David Morpeth, and Samptor has a softer side to him than he has ever showed to any other young man."

Mr. Morpeth had often paid visits to Mark in his bungalow, and there was no more honoured guest at the Collector's table than the old Eurasian, and no more popular man in the little station of Puranapore. Through him, Mark was kept much more in touch with Hester than from Charlie's brief epistles from his London chambers. Often indeed all mention of his sister's name was purposely omitted. So when on Mark's first furlough home he desired to reach her, it was not to Charlie he turned, but decided on more direct methods.

When Hester heard footsteps approaching the walnut tree under which she sat, reading the brown volume of poems which had reached her one afternoon at Clive's Road, when she sorely needed its ministry, she took them to be her brother's.

"Come here, young man," she called, "sit at my feet and learn wisdom from Browning!"

"Nothing will please me better, Hester," answered a familiar voice that was not Charlie's.

"Mark—you! I never even knew you had left Madras," exclaimed Hester. "Why ever did Mr. Morpeth not give me that bit of news? Have you just arrived?"

"I went to Shropshire first to see my old uncle who has been ailing. He lives—or rather vegetates—in an ancient black-timbered mansion all his lone; but he is a very independent old fellow. I was kept there longer than I reckoned on, owing to something unexpected turning up. Then I had to go to London about some business. I looked up Charlie at his chambers, but he wasn't to be found——"

"Oh, Charlie will be overjoyed to see you! He and Cecil are out shooting rabbits just now. I do hope he'll be back soon."

Mark did not re-echo that hope. In fact he prayed it might be some time before the walnut grove was invaded by any. His eyes were resting eagerly on Hester. He perceived with joy that the healing process had been at work, binding up the old wounds and restoring serenity to the once sorely troubled life.

" I must tell you, Hester," he said with a frank smile, " that I don't feel a stranger to any of your doings. Dear old Morpeth preserves your letters in lavender and gives me a share of them."

For a moment Hester was startled, remembering that she had shared many of her most intimate thoughts with the wise saint with whom she felt a close bond ; then she answered with a smile as frank as his own.

" No, I don't mind. You know so much of those past days, Mark. You could understand much that was only meant for the dear old man."

There was something natural and spontaneous in Hester's tone which had the effect of banishing Mark's fears concerning this first meeting with one who, every day since they parted, had become more enshrined in his thoughts.

" But how can I have been so many minutes without asking for your beloved Collector ? " she said ; and though the topic was congenial, Mark grudged the digression from more personal matters. " Mr. Worsley is quite a family friend here now, you know. He spent a week of his furlough with us and took everybody by storm. Father and mother were so happy with him, and he with them. He seemed like a delightful balm ; and yet I remember when I wouldn't listen to your praise of him and felt sure he must be the surly bear people said he was ! But, Mark, I must tell you, he made some rather sceptical remarks about your being a Eurasian. I think father was rather shocked at his levity. He said it was only a hallucination of yours—though an excellent one—seeing the Eurasians needed friends so much."

" Then I suspect the Collector will have a crow over me now ! " said Mark, with a laugh. " What do you

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think, Hester? I discovered a box of papers in a lumber room at Cheveril. It had never been opened seemingly since it was sent home from the East after my father's death. He was Uncle Mark's younger brother, you know, a lieutenant in the Indian Army; and I find that my mother who was always believed to be an Indian—and a princess to boot—was after all an English girl, lost at the time of the Mutiny, though she had a happier fate than some, for she was adopted by a good Ranee. She was only seventeen when my father married her, and she died at my birth. My father died soon after, and I was sent home to my grandparents at Cheveril; very likely the old cedar-wood box was part of my baggage! I've always understood from Uncle Mark that owing to my father's hasty marriage there was a coldness between my grandparents and him, and that letters ceased between them, though his early death was said to be a great blow. Probably they heard misleading rumours of the choice of a girl from the Ranee's palace. It was a romantic affair, of course, and would be sure to set tongues wagging. Anyhow, the truth has been disclosed at last by this old chest which looks so Indian that I expect it was part of my mother's providing by the Ranee. My mother, by the way, was a daughter of a General Worsley. I can't help thinking and hoping that she must have been of the same family as the Collector; but that will all be cleared up by and by."

"And are you glad or sorry, Mark?" asked Hester, with a wistful look in her eyes.

"Well, to know the truth is always best, don't you think?" said Mark simply. "But I'll tell you who is jolly glad—my uncle! He says he rejoices there has been no "blot on the scutcheon" after all! He is in great excitement, and has had his lawyer down to examine the old papers which he might have discovered long ago."

"But then you mightn't have been the cordial succourer of so many Eurasians. Indeed, I feel sure you will prove no less their friend in days to come, though there is no blood-tie; but I must say, Mark, for many reasons, I'm grateful to the old cedar-wood box for holding its secret so long! Even Alfred, in his heart of hearts, admired your courage, and it was all on the side of good for him," said Hester, wondering why it was so much more easy to speak that name to this friend than to any of her home people.

Mark went on to tell her that his return to India would no longer be to the familiar Puranapore. Since the Collector was about to retire, he acknowledged, he was nothing loth to have a change, especially since an attractive post had been offered to him in the North, though it would necessitate a speedy return to the East.

He now bent forward suddenly, saying:

"Hester, would you risk the black water again and go with me? You have all my love and my worship—will you be my wife? I once banished my love as a forbidden thing and tried to be your loyal friend——"

"You did, Mark," murmured Hester, with bowed head. "Right loyally you did——"

"But now—the present is ours, Hester, the present and the future. You will make it golden for me if you will grant me this. Hester, didn't you invite me to come and learn wisdom at your feet as I came under this tree?" asked Mark, with a glowing mien, flinging himself on the ground and looking up into her drooping face.

"No, it was Charlie I invited."

"My answer, Hester! I have waited long," he pleaded, looking at her with all his soul in his eyes. "I know now too well that I loved you before—before that other ever saw you."

Hester felt as if she knew it too. And she also knew that as the first man who had wooed and won her was false, this one was wholly true. Stretching out both her hands to him, she said:

"Yes, Mark, I will venture the black water again with you! Where you go I will go. My love and trust are wholly yours—and have been since—since that morning we stood together on the deck of the *El Dorado*."

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